掟上今日子の忍法帖
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第一話　掟上今日子の手裏剣

第二話　掟上今日子の兵糧丸

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The Ninja Scroll of Kyoko Okitegami

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第一話　掟上今日子の手裏剣

Ch 1: Kyoko Okitegami’s Shuriken

1

Officer Rivaldi was a skilled detective in the NYPD’s homicide division, and it was precisely because he was so skilled that he barely remained in the division. In fact, while his competence was acknowledged by all his colleagues, the unfortunate truth was that his abilities often served to hinder the investigation rather than help it—a significant issue. If he weren't so skilled, he would have been fired long ago, and perhaps that would have been better for him as well.

For example, this morning, when he received the report from his subordinate, Assistant Officer Casteiz, that a body had been found in Central Park under suspicious circumstances, here was Officer Rivaldi’s reaction:

"A body? A body, you say? Come on, don't refer to someone who passed away in such an unfortunate manner with such disrespect. What’s so suspicious about it? You and I will both die someday, you know? Listen, at least in front of me, don't ever use such an unpleasant expression again. No matter who they were, the deceased deserve our respect."

"Of course."

Officer Casteiz, who was quite accustomed to such outbursts, took them in stride—if she took the time to respond to her superior each time, the rigor mortis of the body would have progressed by the time she finished reporting the situation. She hadn’t served under this skilled Officer for years just by chance—though, to be honest, she rarely referred to herself as his "subordinate." Her superior disliked expressions that implied a hierarchy in human relationships.

Officer Casteiz continued her report on the discovery of the body—or rather, the deceased—with due solemnity.

"The victim's name is Gordon Terrine. He’s a man in his forties, identified through an ID card he was wearing on a neck strap. He was working as a stockbroker in a building near the park."

"What’s wrong with you, Casteiz? The 'victim'? You make it sound as if this person was a pitiful individual who was simply persecuted. What a biased way of putting it. He may have been killed in the end, but surely he had happy times too. There are no simple victims, no matter how many times I tell you. And casually sharing someone’s personal information like that is not something I can approve of. First of all, was it necessary to give me the preconception that he was a man in his forties? It’s as if you’re implying he was killed because he was in his forties. Needless to say, men in their forties have the right to live just like anyone else. You should reflect deeply on that. And Casteiz, I can’t help but detect a certain bias in your tone when you mention his occupation as a stockbroker. I don’t know when you were wronged by one, but listen, no profession is inherently noble or base. In fact, all professions are noble. Just as it doesn’t matter that we’re

detectives. And one more thing: you casually mentioned ‘a stockbroker working in a building near the park,’ but you mustn’t overlook the possibility that he might have been a stockbroker who wasn’t working at all. Assuming that all stockbrokers are employed is an excessive generalization, and we must always bear in mind the pressure that such assumptions can place on them."

"Understood, sir."

Nodding without understanding half of what the other said, Officer Casteiz braced herself for a barrage of criticism for the word "sir" that slipped out of her mouth, but fortunately, it was somehow overlooked this time, so she continued her report on the case.

"The body—excuse me, the victim—no, Mr. Terrine, was found lying on his back in an open area within Central Park. A nearby resident who was walking their dog discovered the body and immediately called it in. By the time the paramedics arrived, it was clear that resuscitation efforts weren’t necessary as he was already completely dead."

"I don’t know who first said it, but I don’t like the expression ‘walking their dog.’ You should call it ‘walking with a family member.’ All dogs choose to be with people of their own free will. So, saying ‘walking their dog’ is just human arrogance. Dogs walk themselves, you know? And above all, whether someone is completely dead or not isn’t something for us to decide."

"Oh, right. Of course, the exact time of death and other details will await the autopsy results—"

"That’s not what I mean. Complete death occurs only when one is forgotten by those close to them. It’s not something for strangers like us to make insensitive judgments."

"I see. You’re right, that was insensitive."

Officer Casteiz killed her own emotions, becoming as neutral as possible, and continued to follow along—if this went on much longer, not only would rigor mortis set in, but decomposition would begin. If she were to use such an expression, she might be met with, "Decomposition? What’s so defeatist about rotting? Using such a bad word, your tongue itself might rot away!" as a reprimand from Officer Rivaldi. It was no joke; just the other day, Detective Rivaldi, who was himself engaging in his own brand of 'censorship,' argued that if one wants to show understanding for the feelings of those being censored, then one should say 'being censored' instead of 'censorship', in some sort of meta-censorship.

"We’ve already conducted interviews with people in the surrounding area, but so far, we haven’t received any statements about suspicious individuals."

"I can’t believe you were looking for ‘suspicious individuals’ from the start. What does ‘suspicious individual’ even mean? It’s only because you think they’re suspicious that they seem that way. Never forget that everyone has family, lovers, and friends."

"Well… yes, it's true that we haven't found anyone like that."

"Right? You should refrain from such witch hunts."

Whether or not she should refrain, searching for perpetrators was exactly what Officer Rivaldi and Officer Casteiz' job entailed, and while any person might be abusing their family, committing domestic violence against their lover, or using their friends for money, one of the many things she should learn from her superior was that you mustn't engage in such nitpicking if you wanted to conduct a swift investigation.

"That said, since the deceased was discovered early in the morning, there were relatively few visitors to Central Park at the time."

"I can't believe what I'm hearing! You're saying there were relatively few visitors to Central Park? What was your intention with that remark, casting our Central Park in such a negative light, Casteiz? Comparing it to anything else is disrespectful. This is a landmark we should be proud of, drawing tourists from all over the world. To insult it—are you really an American citizen?"

"I do have citizenship, yes."

"'Having it' isn't good enough. And it's insensitive to those who don't have citizenship. You should really understand that everyone has their own circumstances."

"I understand now. This is very educational."

Where were they? Right, they were discussing how no suspicious individuals were sighted—hopefully, they could get to the point today where they determined what exactly was "suspicious" about this "suspicious death."

"In other words, the perpetrator hasn't been caught, and we don't have a lead on them yet. We're currently reviewing the surveillance cameras in the area."

"The term 'surveillance camera' is incorrect slang, Casteiz. Why promote preconceived notions like that? Those are security cameras, and New York isn't in the business of surveilling its citizens."

After saying that, Officer Rivaldi finally asked a question that was more typical of a homicide detective:

"Are we certain this is a murder?"

Of course, it was. Otherwise, Officer Casteiz wouldn't be wasting her time on this Zen-like dialogue.

Zen dialogue.

That term was quite fitting. Perhaps uncannily so.

"Yes. According to the report, when the body was found, Mr. Terrine's shirt was stained bright red with his own blood, making it obvious at first glance that it was a homicide."

"I don't want to make too much of a fuss, but I wonder if the term 'homicide' is appropriate in this day and age. As soon as you mention homicide, it naturally brings to mind its opposite, suicide. Since it's obvious that reports of someone's suicide can lead to a second or third suicide, maybe we should consider omitting the concept of suicide altogether."

"Are you suggesting that suicide should be considered a natural death or something?"

"No way, treating everything as an illness is out of the question. There are definitely people who would be hurt and pushed to the edge by such words. So, even if there were arguments to treat suicide as natural death, I wouldn't necessarily find it commendable."

"Right. Mr. Terrine didn't die by suicide, illness, or natural causes. He had a knife stabbed into his chest, and there was significant blood loss."

Officer Casteiz forcefully directed the conversation back on track.

They were now getting closer to the main issue.

"There's still the possibility that he stabbed himself in the chest. You shouldn't go around suspecting everyone indiscriminately."

If that wasn't suicide, then what was?

Officer Casteiz thought that when it came to suspecting everything, no one could surpass Officer Rivaldi, but she didn't say it aloud—because if she did, she would end up getting a lecture like, "Saying that your right hand is superior to your left is just the arrogance of right-handed people."

It was best to keep her opinions to herself and move the conversation forward without arguing.

"Yes, indeed. You're absolutely right. However, there's something odd if we were to conclude that he stabbed himself in the chest—"

Even by legal standards, when a body was found in a public place, it was already enough to consider it a case, but the reason this was considered a suspicious death wasn't just because of

that. The weapon that had been left stabbed in his chest was what made it strange and turned this into a suspicious death.

"The weapon? Don’t be ridiculous. Just because this is a gun society doesn’t mean there’s a rule that forbids the use of a knife in a suicide, which is a natural death. Guns don’t kill people; people kill people. And people have the freedom to use a knife in their suicide if they choose to."

Whether or not people have the freedom to commit suicide was a matter of debate, but naturally, Officer Casteiz wasn’t about to engage in that argument—engaging in that debate would be like stepping into the ring.

Not again.

"Yes, I understand. I’m not denying the existence of girls who cut their wrists."

"Wrist cutting! Watch your mouth, Assistant Officer Casteiz! Do you want to be erased by public opinion? Do you want your severed wrists displayed high for all to see!? Words that hurt children are not English."

Officer Rivaldi shook his head as if to avoid acknowledging the existence of girls who cut their wrists. If Officer Casteiz were a detective in the juvenile division, she might have spoken up, but she was in the homicide division.

And, though she would be lectured again if she said "fortunately," the victim this time wasn’t a teenage girl, but a middle-aged man.

"However, the choice of weapon is still a hurdle if we are to consider this a suicide."

"A hurdle?"

For once, Officer Rivaldi merely echoed her words—Casteiz had been bracing herself for him to start talking about "athlete rights" based on the word "hurdle," so this caught her off guard. Still, this was a rare opportunity. If she missed this chance, the body might really start decomposing and return to the earth.

"Yes, although it’s a blade, it has a rather—no, quite a peculiar shape. An ordinary American wouldn’t normally use it. Not for suicide, nor for any other purpose."

"Ordinary? The word ‘ordinary’—"

"It’s a star-shaped blade. I think it would be quickest if you saw it for yourself."

Saying this, Officer Casteiz presented "it" to Officer Rivaldi, encased in a transparent evidence bag—it was clearly identifiable at a glance, but since she was dealing with a veteran detective, she carefully added an explanation to avoid any oversights.

"There's a small country in Asia called Japan, and it seems that this is a special throwing weapon called a 'SHURIKEN,' used by an assassination unit known as 'SHINOBI' from that country."

2

Even if the debate about the right to commit suicide remained unresolved, and even if the method of choosing one's own death was a personal choice—whether by gun, knife, jumping, drowning, poisoning, or even a double suicide—and it wasn't something for others to interfere with, Officer Casteiz couldn't imagine an American committing suicide with a shuriken, a weapon used by an overseas assassination unit.

She thought that even Officer Rivaldi would have to agree with her on this point, but what surprised her was that he knew about the existence of Japan, a small island nation in the Far East.

"That's quite disrespectful. I'm always keeping an eye on the world. I don't want to bring outdated values into the global society. Besides, although it was only for a short period, I once served as an analyst at a base in Okinawa during my time in the military."

"Really?"

It was an unexpected past for the skilled detective. In that case, there didn't seem to be a need to explain in detail about Japan's assassination unit, "SHINOBI."

"No, there were no 'SHINOBI'—ninjas—at the Okinawa base where I was stationed. From what I've heard, ninjas mainly operate in the Kinki region and the Tokai region, which are central areas of Japan. Those regions are also known as major spiritual centers in Japan."

Though he knew about ninjas, this was apparently the first time Officer Rivaldi had seen a shuriken, and he inspected the evidence bag with a curious look—though there was blood on the bladed part, as expected of a veteran detective, he didn't seem fazed.

"Is there a possibility that Mr. Terrine has some kind of connection to Japan? Perhaps, like me, he had lived in Japan at some point?"

"It doesn't seem likely. We're still investigating, but when we briefly spoke with his family at the hospital, they suggested that he hadn't even left Manhattan, let alone traveled to Asia."

While they couldn’t completely rule out the possibility that Mr. Terrine was somehow involved with an assassination unit, it was safe to assume that this wasn’t a suicide—Officer Casteiz was genuinely relieved to avoid getting into a debate about suicide with Officer Rivaldi, but if this wasn’t a suicide, it raised other significant issues.

"If an American citizen was killed with a weapon used by a foreign assassination unit, this could turn into an international incident…"

For once, Officer Rivaldi’s muttering wasn’t an exaggerated or unfounded worry. Young Officer Casteiz didn’t have a precise understanding of the current state of the Japan-US alliance or the extradition treaty between the two countries, but the discovery of this suspicious death could potentially cause a significant rift.

She’d hate it if she couldn’t eat sushi anymore.

"Since Mr. Terrine was a stockbroker, we’re investigating whether he had any Japanese clients. If there was a financial dispute—"

"Assuming financial trouble just because he was a stockbroker is far too simplistic. I’m speechless. Think about it—there are far more stockbrokers who aren’t murdered than those who are."

That was typical of Officer Rivaldi’s reasoning, but even he couldn’t deny that such an approach was reasonable in a global society—after some thought, Officer Rivaldi asked,

"Is it possible to obtain this shuriken domestically?"

"It’s not impossible, but it’s not easy either. Despite its appearance, it’s still a blade. It’s not something that’s easily available even in Japan, let alone domestically."

If it were just a toy, it might be found in the goods section of a niche comic shop, but the one in the evidence bag was clearly a weapon designed for killing or wounding living beings—definitely not something you’d let a child handle.

"Was this the only shuriken that was lodged in Mr. Terrine?"

"Yes. There were no other noticeable external injuries."

"Does that mean there were unnoticeable injuries? Report accurately."

"There were no other cuts or stab wounds—of course, there’s always the possibility that the autopsy will reveal new facts."

"Indeed. However, to think that a throwing weapon like this, such an oddly-shaped chunk of metal, could be thrown with such precision to hit the heart in one shot… Japan’s assassination corps is truly terrifying… Oops."

Officer Rivaldi made a gesture as if to cover his mouth. He seemed embarrassed that he had carelessly called a blade from another cultural sphere "oddly-shaped." Officer Casteiz pretended not to notice.

"Forensics is investigating, but so far, no signs of a struggle or footprints have been found around where the victim was lying. The shuriken was probably thrown from a distance."

"If it was a ninja, they wouldn’t leave footprints. Over there, they have a word for the steps 'SHINOBI' make: ‘stealthy footsteps’ (nukiashi sashiashi shinobiashi)."

"But if the perpetrator intended to throw something, a regular knife would have sufficed. The fact that they went out of their way to use a distinctive shuriken might suggest they were trying to make a statement. Perhaps a declaration of sorts."

"A declaration, was it? Are you unfamiliar with the principle of presumption of innocence, Assistant Officer Casteiz? We should pause for a moment and consider whether it's appropriate to refer to the person who threw the shuriken as the perpetrator."

"Absolutely. Thank you for your guidance and advice."

Right after she said that, Officer Casteiz' phone vibrated—speak of the devil. She thought it was a call from forensics, but it turned out to be from a colleague who was in charge of questioning people around Central Park. She would have preferred to take on that task herself, but unfortunately, everyone was working in their respective areas of expertise. Besides, Officer Casteiz understood better than anyone why her colleagues were reluctant to report directly to Officer Rivaldi.

"Yes... Yes. I understand. I'll inform him. You all continue questioning that individual. ...Officer Rivaldi, new information has come to light."

After hanging up, she relayed the message, and Officer Rivaldi, still gazing at the shuriken with interest, replied,

"And who decides whether it's new information? Such a sensationalist approach to presenting information only serves to unnecessarily inflame the situation."

Business as usual.

Good grief, she could only imagine how he would react after hearing the "new information." But that didn’t mean she could avoid reporting it—especially when the prime suspect was so blatantly obvious.

"It's not from this morning, but we've received numerous eyewitness accounts. Apparently, for several days now, a suspicious Japanese woman has been spotted in Central Park almost every day."

"A suspicious Japanese woman?"

Before Officer Rivaldi could express his opinion on each word in that phrase, Officer Casteiz quickly added,

"You might already know this, but the Japanese assassination unit 'SHINOBI' supposedly includes female assassins known as 'KUNOICHI.'"

She quickly delivered the crucial information in one breath.

3

"Nice to meet you. I'm Kyoko Okitegami, a detective."

It didn’t take long for the NYPD to track down the "suspicious Japanese woman"—though Officer Rivaldi might have considered this to be a kind of bias. After all, a stylish young Asian woman with white hair and glasses was bound to stand out, and a simple inquiry quickly revealed her address.

It might have seemed careless for someone who was supposedly part of an assassination unit to be found so easily, but that didn’t rule out her as a suspect—Officer Rivaldi (with Officer Casteiz acting as his chaperone) personally went to question her, primarily because he had lived in Japan, albeit mostly on a military base, and had enough understanding of the language to not require a translator. However, to their surprise, the "suspicious Japanese woman" introduced herself in fluent English.

While not her native language, her proficiency was far beyond that of a typical tourist, and her residence—a room in an aging apartment building rooted in the local community rather than a hotel—was enough to make Officer Casteiz even more suspicious.

'A woman living alone in a dangerous area is suspicious'—and if she were to voice that thought, Officer Rivaldi would likely reprimand her, saying something like, "I think it's wrong to assume that certain areas are inherently dangerous. Such mental walls create unnecessary divisions." But in this case, the fact that they were able to meet the "KUNOICHI" (?) without needing to use Japanese or break down the door seemed to have left Officer Rivaldi slightly bewildered.

For a man as cautious as Officer Rivaldi, this kind of swift development was, to put it bluntly, his Achilles' heel.

"I'm Officer Rivaldi from the NYPD, and this is Assistant Officer Casteiz. I apologize, but Okitegami-san, may we see some ID?"

As he presented his badge, Officer Rivaldi made this request—not because he doubted her identity, nor because he wanted to verify the age of someone who could easily pass for a high school student.

Not long ago, in a similar situation, Officer Casteiz had carelessly said things like, "All foreigners look the same to me," or "Asian people generally look younger, and I'm envious," and was promptly reprimanded for her "pitiful prejudices." That memory was still fresh.

This time, it wasn't about verifying a tourist's passport but rather the use of the word "detective" in her self-introduction that caught his attention—not "SHINOBI," but "DETECTIVE."

While "detective" could also mean a police officer, that wasn't the issue.

"Please, just call me Kyoko."

The white-haired woman responded with a cheerful smile—she had already unlatched the door chain and opened the front door wide from the start, taking a stance completely opposite to Officer Rivaldi's cautiousness.

"Well then, Kyoko-san. Your ID, please."

Even with her door open (both physically and psychologically), Officer Rivaldi didn't step inside easily, and he pressed her again—though it might have been overkill, he discreetly reached for the gun at his waist, perhaps a reasonable precaution given the possibility that she was a member of an assassination unit.

Incidentally, Officer Rivaldi actually used "KYOKO-san" in Japanese rather than calling her "Mrs. Kyoko" or "Ms. Kyoko."

Although English seemed to be no problem for her, his insistence on not distinguishing between married and unmarried women was reflected in this choice—after all, this was the man who, when sending a wedding gift to a colleague, went so far as to think, "Well, they might already be divorced. Or it could be a marriage of convenience."

"Oh dear, that's a problem. You see, I don't carry any form of identification."

Ms. Kyoko said this without appearing troubled at all, tilting her head slightly. Even Officer Casteiz, as a fellow woman, found the gesture charming, but such behavior was ill-advised in front of Officer Rivaldi. He wasn't someone who would be swayed by cuteness.

"Are you operating as a detective without a license? That's a problem, Kyoko-san. In this country, detective work requires proper authorization—well, we can discuss that later. If that's the case, then your passport, international driving license, or even a student ID will do. We just need something that can confirm your real name and age."

"I don't have anything like that at all."

Ms. Kyoko said this clearly and without any shame, causing the wrinkles between Officer Rivaldi's perpetually suspicious brows to deepen even more—Officer Casteiz was also understandably taken aback.

Even the victim in the murder case had an employee ID hanging from a neck strap—she didn't look like a tourist from the start, nor did she seem like a second or third-generation Japanese American, but Japanese illegal immigrants were quite rare. If the eyewitness accounts were to be believed, it didn't seem like she had just arrived in America yesterday or today… At this point, they already had more than enough reason to take her to the station.

Whether she was aware of this or not,

"I don't actually know my real name or age… I do understand that this is New York City, but I have no idea why I'm here."

She made this statement boldly, which could only deepen their suspicions.

Just as Officer Casteiz was about to reach for her handcuffs and Officer Rivaldi for his gun, as if suddenly remembering, Ms. Kyoko clapped her hands and said,

"Oh, that's right, I do have one thing that could be considered ID."

She then quickly rolled up the sleeve of her left arm—faster than the two detectives could react. On her bare skin, written in what could only be called excellent penmanship typical of someone from the "SHODO" (calligraphy) country, and in both Japanese and English, were the following words:

"I am Kyoko Okitegami. Detective. 25 years old.

Currently active in New York.

My memory resets every day."

4

'Since standing and talking isn’t ideal, why don’t you come inside for some coffee?' Invited by Ms. Kyoko, the two detectives eventually gave in and entered the room, where an unusual scene awaited them.

Even so, at first glance, it looked like a stylishly coordinated room, furnished with second-hand furniture typical of a woman living alone (though the phrase "typical of a woman" could never be used in front of Officer Rivaldi). What was unusual, however, were the walls.

All four walls were covered entirely with newspapers—adhered tightly without any gaps. Not just English newspapers, but newspapers in every language available in New York were pasted randomly, stuck on with glue.

"When I wake up in the morning, I like to quickly absorb the state of the city I'm in. I find that my mind is more receptive right after waking up."

Like a student preparing for an exam, the "Forgetful Detective" said this casually, but the strange interior, surrounded by newspapers from various countries, also hinted that the languages she was proficient in were not limited to English, making one gulp involuntarily.

However, Officer Rivaldi wasn’t silently surveying the room because he was captivated by the wallpapering of newspapers. He was likely searching to see if any weapons—like shuriken?—were hidden somewhere in the room.

He was certainly thorough.

Officer Casteiz followed his lead, but as far as she could see, there were no dangerous items—though that didn’t mean Kyoko Okitegami wasn’t a dangerous person.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Please, help yourselves. So, what can I do for you?"

Placing the freshly brewed coffee on the table, Ms. Kyoko now asked, as if it were an afterthought, what she could do for them—how aware was she that, for no matter the reason, the detectives already had enough grounds to arrest her?

In fact, if it weren’t for the fact that Officer Rivaldi was the ultimate human rights advocate, they probably would have already been sitting together in a patrol car by now.

Furthermore, as his chaperone, Officer Casteiz found herself puzzled by Officer Rivaldi’s intentions—why, despite the resident’s repeated invitations, would he risk triggering the Castle Doctrine by continuing to question her in her own home?

Since it was already clear that the "suspicious Japanese woman" spotted was capable of communicating in English, there was no reason for the high-ranking Officer Rivaldi to continue the questioning himself—but if she were to be honest, Officer Casteiz preferred that the skilled detective remain firmly stationed at headquarters.

Without considering the feelings of his subordinate, Officer Rivaldi resumed the questioning:

"Ms. Kyoko, it seems you're operating as an unlicensed detective. Could you tell us specifically what kind of investigations you're conducting in this country?"

"I'm afraid I don't remember. No matter what kind of request I take on or what kind of investigation I conduct, after a good night's sleep, I completely forget everything."

Ms. Kyoko said this as if it were nothing, maintaining her composure—even though she was alone in a room with two officers, she showed no sign of being intimidated.

"But doesn't that interfere with your investigations? If you forget what kind of request you received by the next day?"

"That's why I advertise that I solve any case within a day. You could say I'm the fastest detective around. If you officers have any troubling cases, feel free to consult with me."

The fact that she could so shamelessly pitch herself was astonishing—yet calling herself the fastest and forgetful detective in New York was quite a bold claim.

"Unfortunately, we didn't come here as clients."

Naturally, Officer Rivaldi wasn't swayed by her sales pitch. Not only was he opposed to novels that treated murder cases as entertainment, but it seemed he was about to get to the main point.

For Officer Rivaldi, this was unusually quick—perhaps even he had no choice but to set aside Ms. Kyoko's personality for now.

Whether she was a detective or a member of the "SHINOBI."

"Kyoko-san, where were you between last night and this morning?"

Officer Casteiz took over the questioning, recognizing that this was her cue.

Although the estimated time of Mr. Terrine's death had not yet been determined by the autopsy, the body was discovered in a plaza in Central Park—it was unlikely that it had been left there for several days.

Assuming the incident happened last night, confirming her alibi seemed like a logical starting point.

"As I mentioned earlier, there's this forgetful condition of mine. It’s a flaw a master detective shouldn’t have, but I’m probably the least prone to having alibis."

"A master detective? I can’t let that slide. You should consider the possibility that calling yourself that might hurt the feelings of those detectives who aren’t considered 'master.'"

Ms. Kyoko blinked behind her glasses at this typical response from Officer Rivaldi, then bowed her white-haired head, saying, "I’m sorry, I didn’t think that far."

It seemed this nonchalant Japanese woman was more taken aback by being strongly reprimanded for this than for running a detective agency without a license—it was something Officer Casteiz couldn’t help but empathize with.

Involuntarily, she offered,

"So, you’re saying you don’t have an alibi."

Whether this was really offering her help or not could be debated, but Officer Casteiz wasn’t one to find pleasure in watching a public apology.

"It seems you’ve been seen frequently in Central Park recently. What exactly have you been doing there?"

"I don’t remember, but if I had to guess, probably just taking a walk? I was planning to go read a book in the park today, too, if I didn’t have any visitors."

If that was the case, it seemed like her detective business wasn’t thriving. However, Officer Casteiz once again scanned the room—it might be possible to estimate her length of stay based on the dates or headlines on the newspapers stuck to the walls… but then again, she might have used old newspapers.

"Don’t you get tired of going to the park every day?"

This was a question that could easily draw sharp criticism from Officer Rivaldi for potentially harming the reputation of Central Park, but the fastest detective responded before he could,

"I don’t have the concept of getting tired. I forget every day, so I can always enjoy my walks and reading with a fresh mind."

A textbook answer, one might say. Indeed, if her claim of resetting her memory every day were true, then not just the park, but even reading the same book would always feel new.

If Officer Casteiz were to be honest, she would have liked to verify the truth of this forgetful nature right here and now, but asking a question that would imply doubting the witness's sincerity would definitely cause Officer Rivaldi to reprimand her for it.

"Ah, I see. So, the reason I've had the honor of a visit from the esteemed NYPD, who rival Scotland Yard, is because of that."

Despite having just stated that she had no alibi, Ms. Kyoko said this with a hint of joy—Officer Casteiz had expected that her detective curiosity would lead her to ask, "So, what kind of case is this?" But instead, the woman said,

"Well, if someone was killed with a shuriken in the famous Central Park last night, it's only natural that suspicion would fall on me as a Japanese woman."

As if she understood the situation.

"Though it's a bit off-target. Or perhaps, since it's a shuriken, it's right on target?"

"What…"

Instinctively, Officer Rivaldi and Officer Casteiz exchanged glances. Of course, without needing to say it aloud, they both knew that up until this point, they hadn't mentioned the murder weapon—nor had they even mentioned that they were investigating a murder.

There was no way that this incident had been reported in any of the newspapers plastered around the room like wallpaper… the body had only been discovered that morning. The scene had been secured before any reporters arrived, and no photos had circulated online as far as they knew.

Sure, the fact that two homicide detectives showed up together would make it clear that they weren't there to check on her visa—considering they asked about her whereabouts last night, it wouldn't be too difficult to deduce that a murder had occurred last night.

However, the fact that she guessed the weapon used in the crime was a shuriken could only be attributed to a leak in the investigation—or perhaps,

It was the revelation of a secret.

"...Can I take that last statement as a confession, Kyoko-san?"

When Officer Rivaldi leaned forward slightly and asked this, Ms. Kyoko responded even more cheerfully,

"Oh no, it was just a deduction. By a master detective—no, a mere run-of-the-mill detective."

"No matter how suspicious I might seem, wandering around Central Park, it's too abrupt to immediately suspect me. So at first, I considered that the victim might have been Japanese or Japanese-American—hence the murder. However, despite waiting, you never showed me a photo of the victim, who might have been someone I knew. At that point, I figured the victim's cause of death, in other words, the weapon, might have some connection to my homeland. It’s a very natural line of reasoning."

A natural line of reasoning?

It felt rather forced, but—there was a strange persuasiveness in Ms. Kyoko's calm tone. Once she said it, it seemed like the only possible explanation.

"When it comes to Japanese weapons that are popular even in the West, the first that comes to mind is the Japanese sword. Even today, it has value as a work of art—the so-called 'KATANA.' However, if a Japanese sword had been used as the murder weapon, I doubt you would have come to me—because traditionally, the 'KATANA' is a weapon used by Japanese men. Just for reference, ideal japanese women (as in "yamato nadeshiko") would use a 'NAGINATA.'"

"'NAGINATA'?"

Officer Casteiz responded with an obvious question—glancing sideways, she noticed that even Officer Rivaldi, who had experience living in Japan, didn’t seem familiar with the term.

Kyoko smiled faintly at their reaction.

"Yes, well, that’s about how well-known it is. You can imagine it as something like a spear with a knife on the tip—some say it’s even more lethal than the 'KATANA,' but it’s not widely recognized overseas. Even if the weapon used had been 'KARATE,' you still wouldn’t have come to see me as a woman—so that’s why it must be a shuriken."

It’s Japan’s traditional culture, the one and only 'SHINOBI.'

Ms. Kyoko said this with a distinct sense of pride—as if Japan was proud of its assassination squads as part of its traditional culture? Even as Officer Casteiz found this notion somewhat perplexing,

"With shuriken, there’s no distinction between male and female users. If I were to elaborate, there’s also the ninja sword, another type of 'KATANA,' but the shuriken is the most recognizable—because the murder weapon was such an unusual and traditional weapon, suspicion fell on me so quickly."

She neatly wrapped up her argument.

It was almost enough to make one admire her, as if watching an Eastern fortune-teller—but on closer inspection, without being deceived by her persuasive speech, it was still just a wild guess—there were plenty of other possibilities, and in the extreme, there was no reason why homicide detectives couldn't come just to check on a visa.

Even so, rejecting a correct deduction would go against Officer Rivaldi's principles, so he gave a vague nod of approval, saying, "Ah, well, something like that"—this unnecessary sense of fairness, which prevented him from playing dumb, was likely what kept him from rising above the rank of Officer, despite everyone wishing he'd get promoted already.

"Oh, I was right? That's surprising."

If anything, the detective herself seemed to be the one who was surprised.

Regardless of how it started, she didn't seem offended in the slightest at being singled out as the prime suspect just because she was a "Japanese woman"—it was hard to say who was more tolerant, Officer Rivaldi or her.

In any case, though she was still under suspicion, her carefree attitude only made her seem all the more suspicious… She pretended to deduce, acted surprised, and feigned a lucky guess, but in reality, hadn't she known the truth all along?

Officer Casteiz couldn't shake off her suspicions.

"Oh no, it's a misunderstanding. Not a misunderstanding about me, but about Japanese culture."

"That's something I can't ignore. I regularly take courses at my own expense to avoid holding any prejudices about other cultures. I work hard at it every day."

When Officer Rivaldi said this, Ms. Kyoko tried to soothe him by saying, "It's not such a grand matter," but that only backfired.

"Not such a grand matter? It's when adults brush things off like that that they create generational divides. Especially when it comes to Japan, I take pride in the knowledge I gained while stationed at the base in Okinawa Prefecture."

"Military bases are a sensitive topic, and I dislike war, but I respect soldiers."

Ms. Kyoko said something that seemed inoffensive yet somewhat bold—whether or not it was a response to that, Officer Rivaldi asked,

"Isn't it assassins you respect, rather than soldiers?"

The question, for someone as cautious as him, was a bit of a leap—this was the crux of the interrogation. If he could get a confession here, the murder case would be solved. It would be an unprecedented speed for a case handled by Officer Rivaldi—one could even call it the fastest.

However, it was the fastest detective who seemed to apply the brakes at this point.

"That's the misunderstanding. There are no more ninjas in Japan today. They disappeared over a hundred years ago."

"Disappeared?"

Over a hundred years ago?

"But I've heard reliable information that they're still active in the central regions of Kinki and Tokai—"

This reliable information had come from none other than Officer Rivaldi, but when Officer Casteiz made this rebuttal,

"Well, it's true that the Iga City council sometimes meets in ninja attire. However, as an assassination squad, they ceased to exist with the Meiji Restoration. I mean, think about it—shuriken are just impractical."

This was coming from a Japanese person herself, saying something so blunt.

Impractical?

"So, in Japan, it's rare for shuriken to be used as weapons. Perhaps it's only here in New York that they've gained attention as tools for murder."

"Let me make sure I understand."

Officer Rivaldi interjected.

Even as the cultural fantasy he had cherished during his time living in Japan was crumbling, he hadn't lost his core as a detective.

"You're saying that shuriken aren't a common murder weapon in Japan? Like, it's not something every Japanese person carries around?"

"Right. Japan isn't a shuriken society in the same way that America is a gun society—I'm willing to testify to that in court."

If someone with a forgetful nature, who couldn’t even testify to their own alibi, said so, it must be true—by that logic, it might actually be better to exclude Japanese people as suspects. It was like ukiyo-e prints used as packing material ended up being valued overseas.

From the start, considering this was a case handled by Officer Rivaldi, it had been moving surprisingly quickly, so there was no time to be shocked by something like this. Officer Casteiz wasn’t particularly disheartened, but she couldn’t deny a sense of futility. Not only did the investigation circle back to the starting point, but this visit also brought with it a new headache outside of their jurisdiction—while she was no longer the prime suspect, the white-haired woman in front of them was still the suspicious person seen loitering near the scene every day. Moreover, she was an unlicensed detective, without a passport or visa, and a memory-impaired illegal immigrant.

The questioning was over, and it had been a dead end, but that didn’t mean they could just leave her and go home. With the human rights advocate Officer Rivaldi present, they wouldn’t immediately call immigration, but even so, wouldn’t it be appropriate to at least take her to a mental health clinic...?

"But you officers have it tough, don’t you? If there’s anything else I can do to help, please don’t hesitate to ask."

The person in question, despite having been under significant suspicion at one point, showed no concern for her situation. She kept a calm demeanor and, once again, made an offer as if she were trying to pitch a sale—what a shrewd businesswoman. This room's rent couldn't possibly be that high, but considering her fashion sense, where she was meticulously dressed from head to toe, she didn’t seem like someone accustomed to a frugal lifestyle—watching her was unnerving. She was a detective who somehow seemed off-balance.

"No, the ones who are really having a hard time are the bereaved families."

Officer Rivaldi said this as he gently declined her offer—though it didn’t change the fact that an American citizen, albeit one who was no longer living, had been murdered with a weapon of Japanese origin, potentially turning this into an international incident. The fact that his superior could say this so calmly was rather impressive.

"You're right. I completely agree,"

Ms. Kyoko also concurred.

In hindsight, it was a short conversation, but it seemed to have been enough time for the Forgetful Detective to understand Officer Rivaldi’s character—or perhaps not.

The conversation didn’t end there.

Because the Forgetful Detective added one final remark.

"My heart goes out to the family who received the devastating news that their loved one was ‘poisoned’ by a shuriken—no matter how much they try to forget, it’s something that will be very hard to let go of."

5

Back at the station, the first report the two detectives received was that, as that suspicious Japanese woman had said, the cause of death for Mr. Gordon Terrine, who had been found dead in Central Park, was not stabbing but poisoning—as revealed by the autopsy. The autopsy confirmed not only that the estimated time of death was as Officer Casteiz had predicted but also that poison had been detected in the victim’s body. The same poison was found smeared thickly on the shuriken that had been placed in an evidence bag. In that sense, it was undeniable that the shuriken embedded in the victim’s chest had delivered the fatal blow, but the implications had shifted slightly.

Or rather, the implications had become more intense.

Knives and guns, of course, are terrifying weapons—but the use of poison indicates a more resolute intent to kill.

It conveys a strong determination to ensure death.

It even carries a level of inhumanity akin to the use of chemical weapons—and the real problem was that the poison used was derived from a plant, a plant that only grew in a limited part of the East.

Needless to say, Japan was included in that "limited part"—thanks to the Forgetful Detective’s testimony, they had been able to exclude Japanese suspects from the top of the list, but with her subsequent statement, they were immediately forced to update the list again.

What was that illegal immigrant playing at?

"Please feel free to consult with me if you have any problems—though it would be best if you could come back today, so we can resolve this quickly."

Should they simply chalk it up to her business-minded nature?

Though her revelation had reignited suspicion against her, it could also be seen as a bold move to reestablish herself at the top of the suspect list, perhaps out of a desire to continue working as a detective in the cutthroat world of New York.

"No matter where the killer is from, shuriken aren’t exactly suitable for instantly killing someone. Since they’re a spinning projectile weapon, they don’t penetrate deeply like a typical knife would. Even if they hit the chest, it’s questionable whether they could pierce the heart—so if the killer wanted to intentionally leave the shuriken at the scene to pose as a ninja, it would make sense for them to coat the blade with poison. And when it comes to a poison that feels Japanese, I’d say it would be tetrodotoxin from pufferfish."

She missed the mark on identifying the poison, but she wasn't far off in linking it to Japan—whether this was due to her detective instincts or because she was part of a supposedly extinct assassination squad, Officer Rivaldi, true to form, decided to reserve judgment for the time being.

However, the information provided by the Forgetful Detective, that the assassination squad 'SHINOBI' had perished, or at least ceased activity, appeared to be accurate as far as an internet search could tell—though a report based on "accurate information found on the internet" wouldn’t satisfy Officer Rivaldi, within Officer Casteiz' mind, she could at least accept the "extinction" of 'SHINOBI' as fact.

On the other hand, searching for terms like "Forgetful Detective," "The Fastest Detective," or even simply "Kyoko Okitegami," yielded no relevant results—not even when searching in Japanese with a dictionary in hand, which was even stranger. How could a private detective be operating without an official website or even a Twitter account?

It was almost as if, like an assassination squad, her information was being controlled or concealed—maybe they should have forcibly brought her to the station after all. They certainly had enough pretext to do so.

More as a matter of course than out of any real expectation, they also searched her profile in the criminal database of the NYPD, but again, they came up empty-handed—Officer Casteiz wasn’t particularly familiar with Japanese names, but something about it felt like an alias. Compared to the fact that a shuriken was used as the murder weapon, the woman herself seemed far more mysterious—although, when it came to the criminal database, there was another development.

Not only was the poison detected on the shuriken, but they had also managed to lift fingerprints from it—honestly, they hadn’t expected much, so they were surprised when the forensics team reported that there were clear prints from all the fingers on the right hand—thumb, index finger, middle finger, ring finger, and pinky.

This was a blunder unworthy of an assassination squad.

Leaving the weapon at the scene was already a mistake, but with this, the possibility that the perpetrator was a surviving member of the 'SHINOBI' became even less likely—especially since the fingerprints had produced a match in the database.

This should have brought them closer to solving the case in one fell swoop—but that wasn't the case, because Officer Rivaldi was in charge of the investigation.

"I don't know how you were raised, but I don't think it's right to suspect someone just because they have a criminal record. Letting go of such prejudices is the best way to prevent repeat offenses."

That voice had already become ingrained in her mind and wouldn't go away, but this time, it wasn't just that—the person whose fingerprints matched, Fruity Young, was a two-time convicted con artist specializing in marriage fraud.

Although she was undoubtedly a heinous criminal to her victims, her profile didn't exactly scream "someone who'd commit murder in broad daylight in Central Park by throwing a bizarre, poisoned weapon."

Ms. Fruity Young was a 37-year-old woman, so in that sense, she might meet the criteria for a 'KUNOICHI,' but according to the registered information, she was born and raised in America—specifically, in the state of Hawaii. While Hawaii does have a large number of Japanese tourists, she had never heard any rumors about assassins enjoying flyboarding there.

Even though Mr. Terrine, the victim, being a stockbroker might make him a likely target for a marriage scam, none of his valuables, like his wallet or watch, were stolen from the body. Moreover, Mr. Terrine was married and had one child. While it wasn't unheard of for someone with children to fall victim to marriage fraud, they didn't exactly strike her as prime targets. And while marriage scammers turning into murderers wasn't unheard of either, in both of her prior cases, she had received suspended sentences after making a plea deal—whether because she wasn't considered particularly malicious or because she had an excellent lawyer.

If it was the latter, arresting her wouldn't be so easy. Having already made one misstep, the idea of rushing to confront her as a suspect seemed even less appealing—however, it was impossible for Officer Casteiz to not suspect someone with a criminal record. At the very least, she had to suspect her to the same degree as anyone else who'd left fingerprints at a crime scene.

If allowed a bit of hypocritical language, it was necessary to proceed with the investigation meticulously, to clear away doubts and preconceptions—after all, even though they're both 'DETECTIVES,' a police officer is not a private investigator. It's not about guessing, deducing, theorizing, or getting lucky and being right in the end.

No matter the reason why shuriken or poison were used, or even if an unlikely ex-convict has surfaced, at least they had the fingerprints—irrefutable, concrete evidence.

That much was a solid fact. It was neither deduction nor prejudice.

'Alright, we have her address on file, so for now, let’s forget about that white-haired woman—just like the Forgetful Detective herself—, and proceed with a proper investigation. Though the definition of "proper" may vary—'

"Assistant Officer Casteiz. Got a moment?"

Just as she thought that, someone who would likely challenge that definition called out to her from behind. Of course, it was Officer Rivaldi—she had been planning to visit the ex-convict alone and report to him afterward, but it seemed her plan for a smooth investigation had just hit a snag.

"W-What is it, Officer Rivaldi? I wasn’t planning on conducting a biased interrogation or anything—"

"Huh? What nonsense are you talking about? It’s a summons from the boss—he wants the two of us in the reception room."

She never expected to hear the word "nonsense" from the very Officer Rivaldi, but the reception room? Being called in by the boss wasn’t unusual, given that she was partnered with a capable detective, and she had long since grown accustomed to it. But being summoned to the reception room—that was something she couldn’t make sense of.

Was there a guest? And one important enough to be shown to the reception room? It didn’t seem like her repeated transfer requests, submitted months ago, had finally been accepted, and she had nothing but bad premonitions. But as a member of the force, not going wasn’t an option.

That said, she wanted to push the investigation forward as much as possible, so on the way to the reception room, Officer Casteiz reported the newly identified suspect to Officer Rivaldi.

"I was worried when poison from an Eastern plant was detected, but if it turns out that the American Ms. Young is the murderer, it looks like we can avoid an international incident with Japan."

"I’m not sure it’s appropriate to say that as if it’s a good thing. While it’s true that avoiding an international incident is fortunate for the citizens, there’s nothing good about a case where someone lost their life. Seeking a silver lining in a tragedy is a foolish act that lacks consideration."

She had spoken in an optimistic tone to loosen the tension from being called in together, but the response she received was such a comment—typical, as always. But still, it felt odd that there was no comment on her suspicion of the ex-convict.

Could it be that discovering the absence of ninjas was such a shock to someone who had lived in Japan? If so, regardless of whether she was the culprit or not, that Forgetful Detective had committed a serious offense.

"No, that's not it, Assistant Officer Casteiz. It's not that I wasn't shocked to have my unconscious bias exposed."

"Well, I was completely mistaken too—"

The assumption that an assassination squad called 'SHINOBI' was still active in Japan might be considered a prejudice, but wasn't that on the same level as Japanese people assuming all Americans are cheerful and love jokes? Officer Casteiz, who was rather gloomy and didn't get jokes, thought that taking it that far would make cultural exchange itself impossible, but it seemed Officer Rivaldi's stance was stricter.

Perhaps that's why he couldn't forgive himself.

"Yes, that too, but there's something about that detective—that unlicensed detective—that seems familiar. I don't know if I've seen her or heard about her..."

"Huh? Is that also something from when you were in Okinawa? This is the first I'm hearing of it, but is the Forgetful Detective a well-known phenomenon in Japan?"

"I don't know. It's certain that private investigators in Japan are quite different from those in America..."

He sounded unsure.

Although he was a capable detective who tended to avoid definitive statements out of extreme caution, it seemed like he was being even more careful, especially since his lack of knowledge regarding the assassination squad 'SHINOBI' had just come to light.

"I think it was some kind of rumor I heard on the base, but it's all rather vague. It's as if my memory itself is foggy..."

"If that's the case, it might not be about Japanese culture but rather information related to military secrets. Um, Japan does have the Self-Defense Forces, right?"

The Forgetful Detective herself had said something about respecting soldiers, so even if she wasn't from an assassination squad, it wouldn't be surprising if she were a former member of the Self-Defense Forces.

The left arm that bore her ID (or was it a memo?) looked too thin to be well-trained, but then again, considering that she was living alone in New York, she must be pretty tough.

"That comment sounds like you're implying that women who don't live alone in New York aren't tough, Assistant Officer Casteiz. You should have thought about it before speaking. Well, I'll try calling a former colleague who's currently stationed in Okinawa when I get the time. I might be able to get some information about Kyoko-san."

Live information that couldn't be found on the internet, huh... Officer Rivaldi was someone who took his time with investigations, so it was hard to imagine a luxurious moment of "when I get the time" ever arriving, but as Officer Casteiz had no connections in Japan, she had no choice but to leave it to his discretion.

As they were talking, they arrived at the reception room.

It felt like they had entered a completely different world, even though it was in the same building—as if, to borrow a term from Japanese culture she had just picked up as a byproduct of her internet search, they had experienced an 'ISEKAI TENSEI' (reincarnation into another world).

For now, let's forget about the mysterious Forgetful Detective, straighten up, and enter the room—Officer Casteiz thought as she announced her name and rank and opened the heavy door to the reception room, but immediately afterward, she would regret not having insisted her superior make that international call on the spot.

6

"Are you the two officers who met with Kyoko Okitegami this morning?"

In the reception room, where they had been granted entry, were their boss from the Homicide Division and a blond man in sunglasses and a white suit whom she had never met before—he introduced himself as an FBI agent named White Birch.

Though he looked younger than even Officer Rivaldi, and depending on how you saw it, perhaps even younger than Officer Casteiz, the fact that he was in the reception room suggested he might be someone high up in the FBI—or perhaps from a special branch of the FBI.

When he showed his badge, they naturally thought it was about the unusual body found in Central Park—whether they called it an unnatural death or a homicide, either term would earn a reprimand by Officer Rivaldi—but,

With the shuriken as the murder weapon and the poison derived from an Eastern plant, they must have suspected international crime and brought in the FBI—but after their boss (who left the room surprisingly quickly) had acted as an intermediary, Agent Birch brought up the name of the initial suspect, Kyoko Okitegami—the Forgetful Detective—instead of the victim, Mr. Terrine.

"Yes. I took Assistant Officer Casteiz with me and conducted the questioning."

Without any hesitation before the clearly unusual FBI agent, Officer Rivaldi responded—he could be a handful, but he was a reliable superior when it mattered. You could see that if there was a problem, he was ready to take it on alone. Despite his emphasis on fairness, at his core, he had the mentality of an old-fashioned organizational man.

"We hadn't even reported to our boss yet, so how did you know, Agent Birch?"

"Oh, no, no. Any information about someone meeting with Kyoko Okitegami is set up to instantly reach me. You could say that's practically my entire purpose in the FBI."

"Her very existence is a federal crime," he said with a laugh as he removed his sunglasses. Without them, he looked even younger—he could even be described as baby-faced. However, what surprised her more than his baby face were his golden eyes, the same color as his hair—though if she said something that showed she found such a trait unusual, she didn't know what kind of scolding she might receive from her supposed ally Officer Rivaldi, so Officer Casteiz was careful not to react.

"That's why I want you to understand that visiting you like this is part of my duty. It pains me to say this to detectives of the NYPD, who protect the safety of the citizens, but depending on the situation, I may have to arrest you. I want to declare that in advance. I have the authority to do so."

His words were polite, yet hostile.

In the crime dramas aired domestically, confrontations between the NYPD and the FBI were a common trope, but Officer Casteiz had never imagined that they would find themselves acting out such a grand scene. She suddenly felt tense—it wasn't her first time meeting an FBI agent, but until now, they had rather built a good cooperative relationship.

"Oh really? Should we call a lawyer?"

Perhaps he didn't want to show any weakness in front of his subordinate, so Officer Rivaldi maintained a tough stance. While it was reassuring, Officer Casteiz could only tremble inwardly.

"If you wish."

"Let's not. The only lawyer I know is a divorce attorney."

With that, Officer Rivaldi wrapped it up.

"So, what about Kyoko-san? Are you saying she's an important witness for the FBI?"

Then pressed for more information,

"Whether she's an important witness or royalty, as long as she’s a suspect in a case, we have no choice but to treat her equally."

"‘KYOKO-san.’ Such a nostalgic way of addressing her."

Agent Birch responded, shrugging his shoulders as if dodging the territorial stance of Officer Rivaldi, responded.

"Indeed, that’s what she was called in Japan. Just like she was called the Forgetful Detective."

"…In fact, we could have arrested her on the spot. The evidence against her was enough to fill the Grand Canyon. We had the authority to do so."

For Officer Rivaldi, that was quite a witty remark, but it was the plain truth… In fact, it wouldn’t have been surprising if they had been summoned to answer for their negligence in not arresting her.

"If you had done that, it would have been quite a hassle to arrange for her release. But I’m sure it would have been more difficult for you two. It was wise of you to leave her without drawing your handcuffs or guns."

What was he trying to say?

He was treating her like royalty, not just a material witness—was her lack of identification, aside from the memo on her left arm, a result of the witness protection program?

No, if it were in witness protection, her identity and background would have been meticulously crafted—she wouldn’t be let loose with a title like "unlicensed detective."

"So, what was she like? Kyoko Okitegami, I mean. Assistant Officer Casteiz, you've been quiet for a while, why don’t you answer?"

Agent Birch began his questioning.

She was supposed to interrogate the ex-convict whose fingerprints were found at the crime scene in the afternoon, but now she herself was on the receiving end of an interrogation.

Since she had been directly addressed, she couldn’t just hide behind Officer Rivaldi. But when asked vaguely about what she was like, what exactly was he trying to find out?

"Anything is fine, just tell me exactly what you felt, without leaving anything out. You see, I've been issued a restraining order against approaching Kyoko Okitegami. Even though I arranged her place of residence, I have to rely on hearsay to know what kind of life she's leading there."

He talked about being in a supervisory role, yet he had a restraining order against her? What kind of position did this small man hold within the FBI?

However, this wasn't a situation where she could ask questions… Officer Casteiz decided to follow Agent Birch's instruction and simply say what she felt.

"For someone who was suddenly visited by officers without any prior notice, she was quite composed. Composed, or rather, brazen—she opened the door without even a chain lock, and cheerfully invited us inside. You could say she was careless."

They had shown their badges and all, but she was far too unguarded for someone supposedly under witness protection… On the other hand, her attitude also felt out of place for a murder suspect. She didn't have any intention of keeping a distance from the officers.

"It even seemed like she was pleased to have received a visit from us…"

"Well, that's because she's a master detective. I suppose she has a strong admiration for globally famous law enforcement agencies."

Indeed, she had said she admired the NYPD—and called herself a master detective. Even though Agent Birch had asked her not to leave anything out, she didn't feel the need to report that the woman had been gently chided by Officer Rivaldi for calling herself that.

"Maybe that's why it felt like she was even happy to be treated as a suspect. But then, she quickly dispelled that suspicion with her own testimony—ah, no, that's putting the cart before the horse. At first, she made statements that seemed to deepen our suspicion. Like guessing the murder weapon out of nowhere—"

"That guessing out of nowhere is what was called 'exhaustive reasoning' in Japan. It's a rather inefficient method of deduction where you calculate all possible scenarios you can think of and rattle them off in order of probability. But for the Forgetful Detective, that's the fastest way."

"Ah, yes. The fastest way for the Forgetful Detective. She claimed that her memory resets every day, so we couldn't confirm an alibi. Originally, we went to talk to her because she had been spotted walking in Central Park almost daily, but she didn't even remember that."

She couldn't tell if it was a ruse to throw the detectives off her scent, but in hindsight, even if it were a lie, it didn't seem like a particularly meaningful one.

If she were going to lie, it would have made more sense to fake an alibi or fabricate a reason for walking in Central Park—though she knew from experience that there were plenty of suspects who told meaningless lies.

"Her forgetful condition is real. I can guarantee that. If you want, I can even submit a medical certificate."

"Are you a licensed doctor, Agent Birch?"

"Heavens, no. I'm not that competent. Playing doctor is just a hobby—I'm simply an expert on Kyoko Okitegami."

"Ah… an expert, you say?"

She ended up giving a half-hearted response to an FBI agent—she knew that if this were an interrogation room instead of a reception room, she'd definitely be getting yelled at for such an attitude.

However, the expert on Kyoko Okitegami seemed to find Officer Casteiz' confusion amusing as he pressed further, "What did the room you were invited into look like?"

"It was an old apartment building, but the inside was very clean. It was well-maintained, and there wasn't any particular sense of an Asian style. If I had to say, it gave off more of an English vibe. She seemed particular about her coffee—only the cups didn't seem to be second-hand. And one noteworthy thing was that the entire wall was covered with newspapers in various languages. Newer ones were layered over older ones—she said it was to update her information first thing in the morning."

"It's like the New York branch of the Forgetful Detective Agency. It looks like she doesn't need any more messages from me. Kakah."

Agent Birch let out a strange laugh.

Well, it was the kind of interior design that would make anyone laugh.

"Is that kind of interior common in Japan?"

"Japan has a culture of wall newspapers. There's also a trend of considering foreign language newspapers, like those in English, to be stylish—by the way, how was her English?"

"She was proficient enough to hold a conversation without any difficulty."

Officer Casteiz honestly conveyed her impressions, recalling how Officer Rivaldi had once passionately explained that it was condescending to say "your English is good" to a foreigner.

"Officer Rivaldi speaks Japanese, so we went to question her together, but it turned out to be unnecessary. There was a bit of an accent that made it clear it wasn't her native language, but—"

"I hate to interrupt, but I can't help but question your choice of the word 'accent,' Assistant Officer Casteiz. It's a choice of words that only comes out when you think you're being clever."

Just as expected, she was sharply rebuked by her supposed ally, but Agent Birch, as the expert, added, "Kyoko Okitegami's native language is Japanese, but she learned English on the African continent, along with French."

"English is taught in Japanese schools as well, but unfortunately, it's heavily focused on reading."

"…Agent Birch, are you also familiar with the Japanese school system?"

"No, no, that's rusty knowledge. I'm sure they've implemented educational reforms by now."

Perhaps, like Officer Rivaldi, the agent had experience living in Japan… If he claimed to be an expert on Ms. Kyoko, it wasn't entirely impossible that he had been on an extended assignment there.

"Learning English wasn't easy for me either. I only became able to handle daily conversations after getting lessons from my wife and 'youjo.'"

'Youjo', as in a normal 'little girl' (幼女)?

No, he must have said 'youjo' (養女), meaning adopted daughter.

So, it seemed that English wasn't Agent Birch's native language either—maybe he gained citizenship by marrying an American woman there—oh no, if she started probing into his background, the dependable superior she relied on would completely turn against her.

"So, once her charges were cleared, that was the end of it?"

Relieved that Agent Birch had moved the conversation along, Officer Casteiz replied,

"No, while our business was done, she started pitching her services to us. She expressed a desire to assist in the investigation as a detective. I thought she was quite the shrewd businesswoman."

She added another guess,

"She claimed not to remember, but since she's been seen going out for walks almost daily, it's possible that her detective work isn't doing so well, and she's struggling to get clients."

"Hmm. I see, so the Forgetful Detective, who made a name for herself in Japan, isn't exactly in high demand here. Perhaps that's something that needs to be addressed—well, it's good to know she seems to be doing well."

After making her talk so much, to sum it all up with such a commonplace conclusion made Officer Casteiz feel like the interrogation had been pointless—and as if echoing her inner thoughts, Inspector Rivaldi asked,

"Who is she, really?"

To then add,

"It seems we've unknowingly stepped on the proverbial tiger's tail...—"

"It would be more accurate to say you've stepped on a cat's tail. Although, Kyoko Okitegami doesn't have a tail to step on."

As if implying that a cat was more of a threat than a tiger, Agent Birch spread his hands wide, saying, "She's basically as you've described her,"—it was an over-the-top gesture that was as American as apple pie, regardless of where he was from.

"Even if it was a wild goose chase, you did a good job, as expected of the NYPD. I don't have much to add—if you have any questions, feel free to ask."

Oh.

They were allowed to ask questions now.

"Hmph. If you know everything, you didn't have to call us out here in the first place."

"I'll answer anything, but I don't know everything. I just know what I know—sorry for calling you out without an appointment in the middle of your investigation. I've had this habit of suddenly visiting people since long ago—if you don't have any questions, I'll conclude this interview."

*TL Note: His "I don't know everything. I just know what I know" (なんでもは知らないさ。知っていることだけだ) is basically the same as Hanekawa's (なんでもは知らないわよ。知ってることだけ)

But still.

There were so many things I want to ask, yet now that they were allowed to ask questions, they didn't even know where to start—what was the right question to ask about this mysterious

foreign woman, who seemed to be under some sort of overprotective care, to the point that an FBI agent showed up the same day they went to question her, even though she was suspected of being an illegal immigrant? And who was this FBI agent, acting all on his own, if not equally mysterious?

She recalled the 'need-to-know' basis.

Whether it was within their jurisdiction or not, it seemed most wise and sensible to avoid getting involved—at least, that's what Officer Casteiz' common sense dictated.

Her superior's common sense, however, was different.

"I do have questions, and we have our own information network, but if that's how it is, it might be best to hear it directly from the person herself."

Officer Rivaldi said—here it comes.

Even with an FBI agent involved, he was never quick to get to the point—wasn't there a phrase in Japan for this kind of pointless debate, like 'Odawara Conference'? His appearance has even blocked the route of inquiring with his old comrade from his military days by phone.

It was exactly as expected.

Whether it was the witness protection program or anything else, Officer Rivaldi despised special treatment more than anything—he couldn't accept that while there were many people and organizations in the world that needed protection, only a specific individual was receiving institutional benefits.

It's because he valued rights that he challenged privileges—and his subordinates were inevitably dragged into those reckless challenges.

"I see. That makes sense. I consider myself well-informed about Kyoko Okitegami, but precisely because of that, if it's just hearsay from me, it could lead to bias."

Though he didn't explicitly say so, it was clear that Agent Birch had come all the way to the NYPD just to declare, 'Don't get involved with the Forgetful Detective any further,' and he seemed a little taken aback by the unexpected—or rather, bizarre—attitude of Officer Rivaldi, trying to make sense of it in his own way—he had no choice but to understand it that way, given how absurd and unreasonable it was.

At this rate, as he originally declared, both Officer Rivaldi and Officer Casteiz could end up being detained together. With Officer Rivaldi shielding his subordinate by standing in the line of fire and dealing with Agent Birch, it was hard for her to withdraw from the front lines on her own—he was a troublesome superior, but she couldn't abandon him. Plus, she couldn't

completely suppress her personal curiosity either. Despite her open demeanor, the Forgetful Detective, Kyoko Okitegami, hadn't revealed anything about herself—that piqued her curiosity—

"Alright. In that case, how about this as a compromise?"

After showing a gesture of contemplation for a moment, Agent Birch finally proposed what seemed to be the only solution to wrap up the situation.

"Why don't you accept her offer and hire the Okitegami Detective Agency's New York branch to solve the murder case that happened in Central Park?"

"Huh…? What do you mean by that?"

While Officer Rivaldi remained unresponsive, as if specially trained not to react, the less experienced Officer Casteiz couldn't help but reflexively ask back—it wasn't exactly a difficult suggestion to understand.

But it was a puzzling proposal.

"I don't have all the details, but I've heard a bit about the case from your boss… It's a strange one, isn't it? Using a shuriken as the murder weapon. The Forgetful Detective will surely be of help."

"…Do you mean as an advisor on Japanese culture?"

While he had been slow to react, it seemed Officer Rivaldi, like Officer Casteiz, was unsure of the true intent behind the proposal, so he asked.

"Who knows? Kyoko Okitegami doesn't know everything, after all—but as a detective, she's top-notch."

Agent Birch responded, for some reason, with a hint of pride.

"Top-notch. So, you mean she's a master detective?"

While glancing sideways at Officer Rivaldi, Officer Casteiz asked, somewhat sarcastically, to which Agent Birch nodded, "Yes. Exactly that."

"She even had an entire building for her office—though, she was so good that the office was utterly destroyed. That's why she moved to New York."

It seemed like a rather brief explanation, but since her superior had forfeited the right to question that Agent Birch had so generously granted, she couldn't press further—judging by the

situation, it seemed that the FBI had gone to great lengths to facilitate her move, though depending on how you looked at it, it almost sounded like she was exiled from Japan.

The idea of someone seeking asylum from Japan to America was almost unheard of, even in fiction, but regardless of their reactions—or lack thereof—Agent Birch continued.

"I, too, would like the Forgetful Detective to build up her track record here as soon as possible. I can't have her spending all her time on walks and reading, she's not a stray cat. I understand that I'm being overly protective—that it would be best if I could leave her alone."

"…We don't intend to ask a civilian to assist in an investigation. Especially since she hasn't been cleared from the suspect list yet."

Officer Rivaldi's response was as rigid as ever, but this time, it was a perfectly reasonable answer as an officer, though the proposer seemed not to hear it at all.

"The fee and necessary expenses, I'll pay them personally. Please allow me at least that much. Don't worry, my family is quite well-off."

He continued—generous as it may seem, it came off as an unpleasant boast.

Could this agent really be some kind of aristocrat?

"Oh, I did live in a European castle for a time. Just kidding, but if you're saying Kyoko Okitegami is still a suspect, then isn't that all the more convenient? You can pretend to request her help with the investigation and skillfully interrogate her in the process… She'll probably be far more talkative than if you confronted her directly."

He had a point.

It was unclear whether it was due to her forgetful nature or not, but while talking, she had a tendency to smile and evade questions—like an innocent tourist, she seemed to simply enjoy the visit from the NYPD, not showing even a hint of opening up to them.

Would the relationship change if she became the officers' client…? Even if Ms. Kyoko were the culprit, it wouldn't be the most "surprising twist" now that she was no longer the prime suspect—confusing as it was, Agent Birch's suggestion might indeed be the best conclusion for that meeting.

The final decision rested with Officer Rivaldi—depending on how he evaluated the Forgetful Detective. Even though he disliked special treatment and privileges, he was about to make an international call earlier, so he must have some interest in that illegal immigrant.

"You don't have to think too seriously about it. It's worth a try, even if just for a day, to experience the master detective who made waves in Japan."

Solving any case in a single day.

That was the Forgetful Detective's catchphrase—wasn't it?

7

"Nice to meet you. I'm Kyoko Okitegami, a detective."

After exchanging phone numbers with FBI Agent White Birch, the two of them walked straight back to the run-down apartment where the suspicious Japanese woman lived alone—ultimately, Officer Rivaldi had accepted Agent Birch's proposal.

Originally, they were supposed to visit the registered address of Mr. Fruity Young, a con artist with a criminal record whose fingerprints were found on the shuriken used as a weapon, but before that, they made a bold detour—in fact, requesting investigative cooperation from a private detective was an unusually bold decision for Officer Rivaldi. Of course, he didn't make the decision lightly, but it seemed he had his own reasons.

In the homicide division, there were some officers who could be flexible and use such investigative methods, and even the young Officer Casteiz had a had her own connections with a shady informant or two, but still, Officer Rivaldi usually prioritized fairness over justice—this must be the first time in his long career as a officer that he had ever requested a private detective, especially an unlicensed one, to solve a case.

However, on this point, Agent Birch had assured them, "Don't worry."

"After all, she's the Forgetful Detective. Even the cases she's hired for, she forgets by the next day—that's why, even in Japan, she took on many requests from law enforcement agencies. No matter how big a case she solves, everything gets neatly swept under the rug, her accomplishments completely covered up."

Could that be why there were no hits when searching in Japanese—'coverup' was quite the taboo word for Officer Rivaldi, and if they were to hire her, he wouldn't intend to hide that from her, but it wasn't an option they could choose.

And so, Officer Casteiz drove, bringing them to their second visit of the day—when they knocked, the white-haired woman who appeared answered with the same line, not even bothering with a chain lock as she opened the door wide—"Nice to meet you?"

"Oh, are you detectives from the NYPD? That's so cool. For me, it's as much of a dream as Scotland Yard."

She’s saying almost the same thing as this morning—wasn’t her memory supposed to reset only once a day? Or was she simply messing with them?

Just before they left this morning, she said something that now seemed prophetic, "If you come back today, it’ll be quicker," and while that prophecy had indeed come true, the Forgetful Detective’s memory seemed to have reset in just a few hours—what was going on?

"…Could it be, Kyoko-san, that you took a nap this afternoon?"

As if something had just occurred to him, Officer Rivaldi asked, and Ms. Kyoko, looking a bit embarrassed, replied,

"Oh dear, you’ve caught me."

She stroked her white hair—not that it was messy from sleep, nor was she in pajamas, but this was a moment for the skilled detective to shine. While Officer Casteiz would rather he not showcase his skills on something like this, she had to admit, it made sense.

In other words, the memory reset after a day didn’t mean it was strictly every twenty-four hours, resetting at midnight like the Y2K bug—it seemed to mean that once she slept, the memory of 'yesterday' was gone—and that sleep didn’t necessarily have to occur at night. The criterion wasn’t time, it was sleep.

A nap or a siesta could also wipe her memory clean.

It was just speculation since it had been lost to oblivion, but while Officer Casteiz and her partner were being summoned to the parlor by the FBI agent, it appeared Ms. Kyoko had been peacefully napping in this room—and thus, she had completely forgotten about the visit from her beloved NYPD.

The officer wanted to complain, "What were you doing napping after saying we should come back today?" but there was no point in saying that to the smiling "today's Ms. Kyoko."

She had forgotten even that idle comment.

"Is there some kind of case? Despite appearances, I am a detective. I might be able to help."

As she spoke, this time she herself rolled up the sleeve of her left arm to show her handwritten ID—though that ID wouldn’t serve as proof to anyone but herself. So, since she had lost her memory from that morning, that meant she had forgotten all about the murder case in Central Park that was on the table—now, the title of the Fastest, yet Forgetful Detective might work against them.

"It’s not really a conversation to have standing here. Please, come inside. I’ll brew some delicious coffee."

Just like in the morning, Ms. Kyoko invited them inside without any caution—Officer Casteiz and Officer Rivaldi exchanged glances and decided to accept her hospitality.

Not that they would say no to coffee.

Normally, Officer Rivaldi would say, "Caffeine is addictive, so I can’t recommend offering it so frequently," but such warnings were pointless if the other party wouldn’t remember.

At first glance, the room didn’t seem to have changed, but on closer inspection, the newspapers used as wallpaper—what would be called wall newspapers in Japan—appeared to have been updated.

Maybe she went out before her nap (a walk near Central Park?) and bought this morning’s newspapers in various languages at a kiosk—even so, the shuriken murder case didn’t seem to have made it into the articles yet. At any rate, the two officers sat at the second-hand table, just like in the morning.

Having to explain the shuriken murder case all over again was an unprecedented waste of time, but on second thought, since she was the prime suspect this morning, they hadn’t explained it in much detail—they only revealed the "secret" that a shuriken was the murder weapon because she had brought it up.

Now, as a client, how much investigative information should they divulge?—Agent Birch had managed to convince Officer Rivaldi with the twisted logic that precisely because she was still a suspect, they should hire her, but even as a client, there were things they could and couldn’t say. They had no choice but to leave that judgment to the skilled Officer Rivaldi, but by his standards, he would likely impose very strict regulations.

It was a disadvantageous condition for a detective eager to build up experience.

"So, once again, what can I help you with?"

"Well, it’s more of a request—there’s a case we’d like to ask you to solve, Kyoko-san. Actually, we visited you about this case once this morning."

'Visited you'—it was more like 'suspected you', but even when he phrased it like that, Ms. Kyoko simply responded, "Oh, is that so?" as if it were someone else's business—it probably felt like someone else's business since she had forgotten her own involvement.

"It must be a hassle to repeat the same story twice, so why don't I try to deduce it for you? I suppose a murder occurred near Central Park where a shuriken coated with poison was used as the weapon?"

This was indeed the second time, but this time, she not only guessed the shuriken but also accurately pinpointed the area of Central Park—despite having forgotten, her accuracy had improved.

Did Agent Birch call this 'exhaustive reasoning'?

"Actually, if I didn't have guests, I was planning to take a walk in Central Park later—perhaps, waking up and going outside to read is just part of my routine. I had nothing else to do, so when detectives from the homicide division visit someone like me, it's only natural to deduce that a murder occurred near Central Park and that the 'mysterious Japanese woman wandering around' became a suspect."

So, the part where she identified the weapon as a 'shuriken coated with poison' might be the same logic she had used this morning—once the trick was revealed, it was a perfectly reasonable deduction. Come to think of it, by vaguely stating "near" Central Park, she seemed to have employed a little trick to increase her chances of being correct.

Even if she missed the mark, it wasn't as if her life was on the line, so it was like a greeting card—perhaps reclaiming the spotlight after being outshined was also part of the Forgetful Detective's modus operandi.

Or perhaps, it was the hallmark of a master detective.

"Still, I wonder what kind of circumstances led to you asking me, a suspect, to solve the case?"

It seemed that what she didn't know, she truly didn't know.

If she wasn't playing dumb, it seemed she wasn't aware that she was being monitored or maybe even overprotected by the FBI—or perhaps, even if she did realize it, she would forget by the next day after a nap.

In a way, it was the ultimate witness protection program.

Though it would be counterproductive if she forgot the content of her testimony.

"The NYPD has become quite flexible recently."

Officer Rivaldi said, glossing over the truth as the least flexible person in the room, and added, "Assistant Officer Casteiz, tell Ms. Kyoko the details of the case, just like you reported to me."

To her surprise, he'd turned to her—she'd assumed it was the boss's job to decide how much to disclose… being entrusted with such a serious responsibility was troubling. Did he think it better to spill everything rather than risk her making strange deductions from incomplete information?

She panicked, but then quickly realized—that wasn't the case. After witnessing similar deductions twice, Officer Rivaldi must have come to his own understanding of Ms. Kyoko's forgetful nature.

In other words, strict confidentiality wasn't necessary.

No matter how many personal details or circumstances they revealed, this person would forget everything by tomorrow—having experienced that firsthand, he judged there was no need to hide anything from her as a client. There were things they could and couldn't say, but even if they said too much, it would all be forgotten.

'Reset' was quite an apt term.

Officer Casteiz explained the general outline of the case, which Ms. Kyoko had already partially deduced—she added details that weren't known in the morning, like the exact estimated time of death being last night, the fact that the poison that killed Mr. Gordon Terrine was derived from an Oriental plant, and that the fingerprints found on the shuriken belonged to a woman with a criminal record as a marriage scammer.

"Hmm. I see, I see. It's said that even ninjas in their heyday extracted poison from plants and used it—so it might not be far-fetched to consider that the culprit could be a descendant of the assassination squad 'SHINOBI.'"

"Are you saying the marriage scammer is a 'SHINOBI'?"

Officer Casteiz asked, unsure how serious Ms. Kyoko was with her words.

"The 'SHINOBI' not only assassinated but also engaged in espionage in enemy countries. Marriage scams might actually be a specialty of the 'KUNOICHI'—but as for the fingerprints, what do you think?"

She tilted her head, pondering.

"Do you mean that as a professional assassin, they wouldn't leave fingerprints at the scene? That surprised me as well, but—"

"No, no, during the prime of the ninja, fingerprint collection wasn't part of homicide investigations, so I don't think they would have taken precautions against fingerprints. By the way, there's a genre in Japanese mystery fiction called 'torimonocho,' where detectives carry traditional melee weapons called 'jitte'—excuse me."

As someone who called herself a master detective, Ms. Kyoko seemed to have a particular passion for mystery novels, but she quickly returned to the topic—wasn't she supposed to be a Japanese culture advisor?

"However, the fingerprints were taken from all five fingers of the right hand, correct? Given the exposed blade and the lack of a grip on the shuriken, it would be quite difficult to throw it while holding it like that."

"Difficult to throw—?"

"It's a throwing weapon, after all. If it wasn't sharp, that would be a different story—but considering the poison applied, if it pricked the palm while throwing, it would be a disaster. To ensure the user's safety, the throw would likely involve only the thumb and index finger, or perhaps the middle finger as well."

Ms. Kyoko explained while forming a shape with her right hand, like a hand sign. Then she formed what appeared to be a peace sign, and closed the two fingers she had raised—

"If one is an expert, they would grip the blade between the index and middle fingers, apply a spin, and throw it at the target."

She swung her right arm as if throwing.

"Given that even a scratch could be fatal, this would be the safest way to throw it for the user—meaning, no fingerprints would be left on the weapon."

"…Couldn't the fingerprints have been left when the shuriken was taken out of its holder?"

Inspector Rivaldi nitpicked, though it was debatable whether such a thing as a "shuriken holder" even existed among ninja paraphernalia. As if anticipating this, Ms. Kyoko replied, "If she gripped it with her right hand, the fingerprints left behind would be from her left hand, wouldn't they?"

"Of course, it's possible the culprit was left-handed. However, if Fruity is being suspected because of the right-hand fingerprints that were found, doesn't that suggest she's right-handed?"

Honestly, when they'd accessed the database, Officer Casteiz hadn't paid attention to such details as the suspect's dominant hand (would her superior call this a right-handed person's arrogance?). But if it had said 'left-handed', she would've noticed something off… In any case, it was something she need to check later, yet the way Ms. Kyoko jumped into hasty conclusions and Officer Rivaldi's extreme caution surprisingly made them a good team.

As the veteran detective’s usual partner, the policewoman felt a bit conflicted… not that he felt any competitive spirit,

"Isn’t there a possibility that instead of being used as a throwing weapon, the shuriken was gripped in the right hand and used to stab Mr. Terrine in the chest at close range?"

But she presented an alternative hypothesis.

Even though she herself knew it was flawed, the detective didn’t dismiss it outright.

"Indeed, the shuriken, as written in kanji, means 'sword in the hand's back,' so it also has the nature of a hidden weapon—as in, a weapon used for ‘assassination.’"

This time, she provided an explanation of the kanji characters.

"Getting close and delivering a single thrust to the target’s chest with a hidden blade—however, in that case, the size required for it to be hidden in one's hand becomes a constraint. While the use of poison could explain it, you’d have to be extremely close to effectively stab with such a small blade—surely, there would be signs of a struggle if there was such close combat, wouldn’t there?"

They hadn't mentioned if there were signs of a struggle with the victim, but she seemed to be concluding that if there were details like skin DNA under the nails, it would have been disclosed—she was incredibly quick on the uptake.

Losing her memory from the morning and having to reintroduce herself again seemed to have set her back, but she was now catching up at breakneck speed.

"Of course, if it were a real 'SHINOBI,' they would have mastered assassination techniques where the target wouldn’t even realize they had been killed, so the possibility of close combat can’t be ruled out. However, if it’s a brute force stab rather than a precise throw, considering the poison involved, they would likely wear at least latex gloves."

Understood.

The possibility of close combat could be pushed to the back burner.

But that didn’t mean that the suspicion around Fruity Young, the marriage scammer, had been completely cleared, or that they could avoid thoroughly investigating the ex-convict. Regardless of the reason or how she held it, the fact remains that her fingerprints were found on the weapon.

"This is just a rough guess, but maybe the ex-convict was actually the true first discoverer of the crime? Perhaps she tried to pull the shuriken out of Mr. Terrine’s chest in a panic after finding

him collapsed, and that’s when her fingerprints got on it. But then she realized that the victim was clearly dead and that she herself had a criminal record, so she ran away—I could picture something like that happening."

It wasn't entirely implausible, but it felt like her imagination was running a bit wild. Still, the explanation of the fingerprints being left when she tried to pull out the shuriken did make sense. The fact that the shuriken was left at the scene could be seen as the criminal wanting to make a statement, or trying to make it look like the work of the assassination squad 'SHINOBI,' but it didn’t make sense for the criminal to intentionally leave fingerprints—thinking they belong to someone unrelated to the crime seemed more plausible. At least, more so than thinking an assassination squad carelessly left them behind…

And if that possibility turned out to be true, there could be new developments.

"If there is a true first discoverer, she might have seen something, through the eyes of a former criminal. At the very least, she might have noticed more than the witness who found the body while walking their dog."

"I'm disappointed in you, Assistant Officer Casteiz. To make such a dismissive comment about the reliability of someone who found the body while walking their dog. What century are you living in? For all you know, that dog walker could have been a philosopher! Besides, denying a dog a walk when it hasn’t lost its wild instincts is animal abuse!"

Being interrupted on a tangent unrelated to the case felt like having one's train of thought derailed—just like when they once had a trivial debate about being a 'dog person' or a 'cat person,' and he scolded her, saying, 'Dividing people into factions like that only leads to division!' based on his animal rights philosophy. She couldn’t imagine that expecting insight from a marriage scammer's criminal perspective would contribute to improving the social status of ex-convicts, but rather than argue about that or his favoritism toward philosophers, she thought it best to just nod and say, "Yes, of course. I hadn’t considered that. Thank you for your unwavering guidance."

If only his guidance would waver.

Perhaps Ms. Kyoko had made a similar judgment because, because while she watched their exchange with a smile, she quickly shifted gears.

"However, if she is a former criminal, she would likely have realized later that she left fingerprints at the scene, so it's doubtful she would simply return to her registered address. If she knows she’s a suspect, she may already be trying to escape."

She continued the conversation forward.

Even if she realized on the spot that she had left fingerprints, it would have been difficult to wipe off a blood-soaked blade, even if she wasn't aware it was coated with poison… it would be quite the cleanup job for someone who wasn't even the perpetrator.

"In any case, it seems we should quickly secure Fruity Young's whereabouts."

It was rare to hear the word 'quickly' come out of Officer Rivaldi's mouth, but Officer Casteiz couldn't afford to be surprised and miss the boat—before any further instructions could be given, she pulled out her cell phone and sent an email to her colleagues in the homicide division, ordering them to put out a warrant for the marriage scammer.

Ideally, they would visit her themselves, but… even without interference from Agent Birch, with their current hypothesis, the ex-convict wouldn't have been home anyway.

"Yes, but even so, there's only so much we can deduce by continuing to chat here—Officer Rivaldi, Assistant Officer Casteiz, we may not have a dog, but why don't we go for a walk too?"

"Huh? Where to?"

When she asked Ms. Kyoko, who had just finished her coffee and stood up, she answered, "Why, to the crime scene at Central Park, of course"—of course.

Whether she forgot or slept, whether she had a dog or not, it seemed that taking a walk in Central Park was part of the Forgetful Detective's routine.

8

In retrospect, it was bizarre that Ms. Kyoko had carried out all those deductions purely based on theory without even inspecting the crime scene, but it was hard to imagine there would be any new discoveries now at the Central Park scene, especially after the investigation team and forensic experts had already combed through it.

The body had long since been removed, and the tape that had been put up in the morning had already been taken down—the policewoman wasn't sure why they had even bothered coming.

"No, no, I'm sure the NYPD didn't overlook anything, but in Japan, we say 'visit the scene a hundred times,' and there are approaches that only a detective can take."

Wearing a windbreaker printed with the NYPD logo that she purchased (using FBI funds, no less) at a gift shop on the way to Central Park, Ms. Kyoko said this proudly—it was a fashion choice that even tourists might hesitate to wear on the spot, but she somehow pulled it off with style. Officer Casteiz almost wished she had paired it with an 'I Love New York' T-shirt underneath—but, an approach only a detective can take?

"Perhaps I should say this is more of a Japanese thing—but Officer Rivaldi, you might already be familiar with this—ta-da!"

As soon as we arrived at the crime scene, Ms. Kyoko pulled something out from inside her coat—a star-shaped… shuriken, like something you might see on top of a Christmas tree?

"Huh? Kyoko-san, do you carry your own personal shuriken?"

If that were the case, it would be irrefutable proof that she was indeed a descendant of the assassination squad, a true 'KUNOICHI'… however, upon closer inspection, it wasn't a weapon.

It wasn't made of metal, but of paper—newspaper, to be precise.

It seemed she had torn down a page from a newspaper that had been decorating the wall of the Okitegami Detective Agency's New York branch before heading out—and not only that, she had folded and assembled it skillfully into the shape of a shuriken.

"This is another of Japan's cultural traditions, called 'ORIGAMI.'"

"Ah, now that you mention it, I think I saw something like that in Okinawa… I might have even folded one myself. But I think this is the first time I've seen one shaped like a shuriken."

Officer Rivaldi seemed genuinely impressed by the transformation of the newspaper into a shuriken—indeed, they couldn't even begin to guess how one would fold it that way.

It was almost like a magic trick.

Though what they really wanted to see was not a magic trick, but ninja techniques.

That said, it didn't seem like Ms. Kyoko had shown it off just to display her skills. "What I mean is, I want to conduct a re-enactment," she continued, skillfully spinning the paper shuriken in her hand.

"Since we can't use a real shuriken, we'll substitute with this. Don't you think it would be interesting to determine from which direction and from where the culprit aimed when they threw the shuriken at the victim?"

Now that she mentioned it, they hadn't considered that approach. If the weapon had been a gun, checking the trajectory and bullet path would have been their first priority, but because the weapon was a shuriken, the method of throwing it was still unclear—the position of the culprit at the moment of the murder would make it easier to gather witness testimonies, which were currently nonexistent.

"Well then, let’s get started. We’ll divide the roles among the three of us: someone to play the victim, Mr. Terrine, someone to play the culprit throwing the shuriken, and someone to play the imaginary witness observing the demonstration."

Ms. Kyoko briskly took charge.

It was hard to tell who was actually leading the investigation anymore, but there was no room for debate about who would play which role—given that she was Japanese, Ms. Kyoko would have to be the one to play the culprit throwing the shuriken, despite her amnesia. There was no way the two officers, who didn’t even know how to properly hold a shuriken, could throw it well, even if it was made of paper—by process of elimination, Officer Casteiz was left to play the role of the victim.

No matter how much Officer Rivaldi disliked hierarchical relationships between partners, there was still a hierarchy between an Officer and an Officer lieutenant… so they figured the skilled officer would be the astute observer, offering his valuable insights from the sidelines. It was a role he excelled at.

"Well then, Assistant Officer Casteiz, if you would please take this and stand over there."

Ms. Kyoko handed her an apple… a real apple, not a fake one. It was true that people called New York the Big Apple, but did she buy this fresh fruit at the gift shop too? Between the windbreaker and the origami, it seemed that if you took your eyes off the Forgetful Detective for even a moment, she was always up to something.

She was quick with words, and quick with her hands.

Officer Casteiz was sure the white-haired woman considered them necessary expenses, but still… buying things one after another in such a short time, she honestly felt a bit concerned about Agent Birch’s wallet, even though it wasn't her problem. He was a rather small-statured agent to be playing the role of a benevolent "Daddy-Long-Legs" benefactor.

"So, you mean to use the apple as a target?"

It seemed she wanted to adjust for the height difference between Mr. Terrine and Officer Casteiz by using the apple to represent the heart… Holding it in front of the officer's face should work just fine. Though it was just a paper shuriken, the policewoman couldn’t help but feel a bit like William Tell’s son.

Officer Casteiz, standing in the position where Mr. Terrine had been lying on his back, faced forward, trying to estimate where he might have been standing originally—when something struck her. It was an open space, that much she knew in advance, but still…

"Is that spot alright? Then, as the culprit, I'll stand directly opposite… If it were a steel shuriken, I suppose I'd be around here."

Ms. Kyoko said this as she moved into position. As she moved, it seemed she was measuring the distance with her strides—her attention to detail could rival that of the NYPD's forensic team.

Finally, Officer Rivaldi took a position forming an isosceles triangle between the two, and the experiment was ready to begin… though there were still some nagging doubts, but Officer Casteiz decided it was best to just try it out first, and prepared to hold the small apple.

"By the way, was it vertical? Or horizontal?"

"Excuse me?"

"The wound. Was the shuriken lodged vertically in Mr. Terrine, or was it horizontal? It changes the throwing form."

"Oh… it was horizontal. Somewhere around the center of the chest."

When the policewoman checked with a glance, Officer Rivaldi, ever cautious, double-checked with the photo on his smartphone and nodded in agreement—hearing this, Kyoko said, "Then, a sidearm throw it is," and held the paper shuriken between two fingers, in a way that suggested the grip of a master. It almost looked like the grip for a forkball. Speaking of which, although Officer Casteiz wasn't particularly knowledgeable in that area, there were a few Japanese players in Major League Baseball, weren't there? Maybe it was the Central Park setting, but Kyoko's form, as she prepared to throw the shuriken sidearm with her right hand, also resembled someone throwing a frisbee—then her right arm disappeared.

"Hyah!"

The officer felt like she'd been shot. With a gun.

Such was the impact that transmitted through the apple and into both of her arms—though she barely managed to stay on her feet, it was a wonder she didn't fall backward, much like the victim in the murder case.

Huh? What? What just happened?

When she checked the apple in her hand, the paper shuriken's blade was indeed stuck horizontally, deeply embedded—the origami had clearly pierced all the way to the apple's core.

"...!"

'No way! If it had been off by just a few centimeters, it would've been stuck right in my eye… No, it's not even impossible that it could've gone through the apple and lodged itself in my forehead.' She almost found myself cursing out loud in a way that could've socially destroyed her, even if not in front of Officer Rivaldi—throwing a baseball would've been much better.

What kind of detective threw something like that at a police officer? She might have looked delicate with her slender arms, but no, she had whipped that thing around like a whip, and practically threw a blade at a human face—what was more impressive than her physical strength was her mental fortitude.

This was certainly the kind of body control one would expect from someone in the military or a special unit of the police force… If she had this kind of skill, living alone in New York must be a breeze. Officer Rivaldi should perhaps make an international call to Okinawa, even now.

In any case, this suspicious Japanese woman had given them yet another reason to detain her without a warrant—if she could do this with newspaper, then a steel shuriken wouldn't even need poison.

"Hmm. This spot is a bit too close."

The person in question, with an air of calm indifference, took two or three steps back, continuing to measure the distance with her strides—could she seriously intend to continue this experiment?

"Assistant Officer Casteiz. Next, let's see if you can dodge it."

It seems she hadn't just had one shuriken made in advance. The Forgetful Detective pulled a second one from her pocket and made that terrifying request—"let's see if you can dodge it"? What if the officer couldn't?

The policewoman looked to Officer Rivaldi as if seeking help, but as an observer, it seemed he wasn't quite grasping the danger, and with a serious expression, he was intently watching the experiment, determined not to miss even the slightest detail—serious expression or not, if this kept up, he might end up witnessing his subordinate's gruesome death.

"Alright, now that my shoulder is warmed up, let's go for the second pitch—"

In retrospect, Officer Casteiz would later recall that she wished the Forgetful Detective, who seemed on the verge of being charged with second-degree manslaughter, had worn a New York Yankees cap instead of an NYPD windbreaker.

Three grown adults playing a makeshift game of baseball in Central Park with zero results would have been a complete waste of time—fortunately, several things were revealed as a result of the experiment. And not just the miraculous realization that the officer was still alive.

While the experiment that proved a human could be injured or killed with folded newspaper might not have universal applicability ("I folded it thirty-two times," Ms. Kyoko had said nonchalantly—if that were true, the shuriken could reach the moon), it also showed that even with such skill, if you know it was coming, you could dodge everything thrown by Ms. Kyoko.

The fact that Officer Casteiz wasn't lying there as a dead body was the undeniable proof.

When you think about it, even a ball thrown by a Major League pitcher wasn't faster than a bullet—and it wasn't like they were trying to hit a home run or catch it. No matter how fast the shuriken thrown by the fastest detective might be, dodging it wasn't impossible if you didn't care about how you looked doing it. Though the officer couldn't avoid getting covered in grass after leaping sideways and landing awkwardly.

And there was another condition: you needed to be able to see the pitcher aiming directly at you and winding up—if it was thrown at you suddenly and out of the blue, there was no way you could dodge it.

But this condition was met without Officer Casteiz doing anything—and that was the problem.

From the moment Officer Casteiz took up the same position as the victim, she noticed—there was nowhere to hide in front of her. The area was completely open, enough that you could play baseball there. The fact that the pitcher had nowhere to hide was what saved Officer Casteiz' life, but the same should be true for Mr. Gordon Terrine.

Even if he didn't realize it was a shuriken, the sight of someone winding up to throw a sharp, pointed object right at him would have been dead center in his line of sight—how could anyone not take evasive action? Even if it were the dead of night, this was New York. It never got completely dark.

And once again: it wasn't a bullet.

Without even considering things like reaction time, if there was enough distance, it was within the range of something that could be dodged—of course, reality didn't always work out so logically.

Officer Casteiz was a trained detective, always engaged in life-threatening work, which allowed her to dodge it, but it was possible that a civilian might freeze up and be unable to avoid it… They couldn't say with 100% certainty that it was impossible.

But that was only in hindsight.

The only way to know for sure was to try it, but for the culprit, there was a way to increase the chances of success—simply throw the shuriken from outside the victim’s line of sight.

When re-examining the victim's position, as mentioned earlier, the front was open, there was a large pond to the right, and a walking path a little further away to the left—the initially presumed first discoverer was walking a dog on this path—and behind, there were bushes dense enough for someone to hide in.

From behind, hidden.

Even though it was possible to throw the weapon safely without being seen, the fact that they deliberately chose to attack from the front, where it was much more likely to be dodged, was very strange—even if they succeeded in killing, there was a possibility that a third party could witness the act of throwing.

This couldn't establish proof beyond a reasonable doubt.

"Could it be that this was an act of deep resentment? The culprit didn’t want Mr. Terrine to die without understanding what was happening; they wanted him to die fully aware of who was killing him..."

"Assistant Officer Casteiz, I never dreamed you were that kind of person. To say something that sullies Mr. Terrine’s character, implying he was hated—what do you base that on? That’s defamation. Do you understand? Defamation."

She understood.

That’s what she was experiencing right now.

Thinking further against this headwind, the problem started from the question of why Mr. Terrine was even in this spot last night—he wasn't like the suspicious Japanese woman who woke up every morning with no memory and wandered around Central Park as part of her routine.

Judging by the fact that he had his securities company ID card hanging from a neck strap, it was more plausible that he was here for a meeting with a client, rather than just walking a dog—though of course, securities men walked dogs too.

The culprit might be among his clients, or perhaps the culprit impersonated a client to lure Mr. Terrine here—either way, the fact that the victim stood 'there,' 'at that time,' 'facing that direction,' was no coincidence but an intentional act.

Then all the more reason to attack from behind—did they want a Western-style duel, using a 'SHINOBI' weapon?

"If it were a sniper rifle, it wouldn’t be strange to shoot from the front," said Ms. Kyoko.

With a refreshingly innocent attitude, as if she hadn’t just nearly killed someone multiple times, she spoke with the same casualness about something just as shocking—no matter how much of a gun society America was, people didn’t walk around with sniper rifles.

The possibility of close combat was almost entirely ruled out, but if it was too far, the shuriken obviously won’t reach, and even if it did, it wouldn’t have enough power to pierce human skin, as their experiment showed—in the first place, air resistance would throw it off course.

"By the way, Ms. Kyoko, is it possible to control the trajectory of the shuriken? Like, even if you throw it from behind the bushes, could it curve sharply and hit the center of the chest?"

"Assistant Officer Casteiz, that would be a boomerang, which is part of Australian culture, not Japanese. People like you lump all foreign things together, and it’s troubling."

Now she had been labeled as one of those 'people like her,' a representative of the thoughtless, but yes, what she meant went beyond a sharp curve; she meant a boomerang.

"Well, it might be possible to bend the course a little, but a U-turn is asking too much—though with a paper airplane, it might be doable."

The officer knew about paper airplanes.

If the trajectory could be altered even slightly, it might be possible to throw a curveball that could follow a victim trying to dodge… assuming you could predict in advance whether the victim would dodge left or right.

"In practical terms, even from the front, the culprit could have thrown multiple shurikens. If the first got dodged, you could throw a second at the fallen victim—however, that didn’t happen, and the culprit hit the target with a single throw… isn’t that right?"

In response to Ms. Kyoko’s question, Officer Casteiz informed her that, so far, no shuriken that might have missed had been found around the scene of the body—judging from the dirt on the victim’s clothes, there were no signs that he had rolled on the ground trying to dodge multiple shurikens.

He had only fallen backward.

"Mm-hmm. So, we have an open-air locked room, then."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Oh, excuse me. We detectives have a habit of interpreting any crime scene as a locked room—Assistant Officer Casteiz, could you change positions with me for a moment?"

With that, Ms. Kyoko briskly walked over—apparently, she intended to play the role of the victim this time. Even though they had already repeated the experiment enough… or was she saying there was something they had missed? Even after putting the policewoman through such a harrowing experience?

"No, it's not that I noticed anything we missed, but I thought that if we just keep trying different things, a good idea might pop into my head. Here, take this shuriken. Don't worry about hitting me, just give it a try."

It was easier for the officer knowing that she didn't have to hit the detective. It seemed that instead of setting up a rotation, they would go for a pitcher-target alternation because, even as an experiment or sport, Officer Rivaldi couldn't bring himself to throw a shuriken at a woman—even in a country like this where lady-first was the norm, there were still those who believe in gender equality—Officer Casteiz wondered if she should enlighten him.

'Well, she seems confident it won't hit anyway, but still, it takes some nerve to hand me the shuriken right after throwing it so mercilessly…' As the policewoman was impressed by this, she tried to hand back the apple in exchange.

"No, let's skip the apple this time… *giggle*."

Ms. Kyoko laughed.

Why did she laugh?

"Sorry. Just now, that would have been an amazingly funny joke in Japanese. Unfortunately, it doesn't quite translate into English."

*TL Note: it's wordplay with "apple" and "pear", the latter can be read in japanese like "flop" (as in a joke)

She shrugged as if to say, "That didn't land," and after rubbing the apple against her windbreaker sleeve, she took a big bite.

How many days she had been losing her memory in this city was a mystery, but at the very least, she ate apples like a local.

As someone who had experienced this experiment, the officer thought challenging it without the shield of an apple seemed reckless, but considering the hidden athleticism Ms. Kyoko displayed when playing the culprit, the detective must be confident in her ability to dodge—and since

Officer Casteiz had been told not to worry about hitting, she'd just take it easy like it was an exhibition.

"Okay, here we go—take this!"

Maybe because she was relaxed, her attempt at a sidearm throw, copying what she had seen, flew surprisingly straight—at least as far as a lightweight, paper shuriken was concerned, the expert grip might give better control—it was something she wouldn't have known unless she tried throwing it herself.

But while the control was decent, the speed was lacking. The detective should be able to dodge this easily… or so the other thought, but Ms. Kyoko suddenly bent backward in a bridge-like motion.

Wasn't that how they dodged in that famous old movie that was a hit in Japan? No, unless Officer Casteiz was mistaken, her shuriken seemed to have hit Ms. Kyoko in the face—indeed, she didn't stop herself with her bent knees and fell dramatically onto her back.

"M… Ms. Kyoko!"

This was bad. She had done it. Looking back, this was insanity, throwing a weapon with enough killing power—paper or not—at a civilian… Officer Rivaldi rushed over, but whether out of concern for Ms. Kyoko's well-being or to read his subordinate a Miranda warning, she couldn't tell. Either way, they needed to call an ambulance immediately—what kind of detective caused a second murder?

"Don't worry. I broke my fall properly."

With Japan's national sport, 'JUDO.'

Or so she said.

Ms. Kyoko spoke while still lying on the ground—as far as Officer Casteiz knew, Japan's national sport was supposed to be 'SUMO,' but that aside, was she really okay? Normally, Ms. Kyoko spoke with a clear, crisp voice, but her English accent and intonation seemed a bit weaker this time—though she understood the reason when she got close enough to look down at the detective.

Ms. Kyoko had the shuriken in her mouth.

"Marshmallow catching—isn't that a Western thing? In Japan, we call this 'catching a blade with your bare hands.'"

"…Huh."

The policewoman felt a wave of relief, but still, even though it wasn’t that fast, would anyone normally catch a shuriken flying at their face with their mouth? Both the detective's face and the officer's career could have been irrevocably damaged.

"If we're going to fully experience the victim's perspective, I thought it necessary to actually catch a shuriken thrown from the front and fall to the ground—as a result, it proves that a shuriken thrown from this position can be caught in the mouth."

No, it didn't prove that.

She couldn't imagine Mr. Terrine, a securities man and not a circus performer, being capable of the same stunt Ms. Kyoko just pulled off, especially with a metal shuriken.

"In the first place, the shuriken Assistant Officer Casteiz threw earlier didn’t have enough force to knock someone backward, did it?"

Officer Rivaldi, who was acting as a witness, pointed this out—he was right, and considering the real shuriken was coated with poison, catching it with one’s mouth could have resulted in instant death.

"Yes. I intentionally fell backward."

As she spoke, Ms. Kyoko took the shuriken from her mouth with her right hand—was the way she held it an attempt to imitate the marriage scammer with a criminal record? Despite her light tone of "let's try everything we can," the reenactment was thorough in its details—though it would have been pointless if they didn't make any discoveries.

"Oh no, I did make a discovery. By lying down here, I was able to clearly determine where the culprit threw the shuriken from."

"Huh?"

"I knew the truth of this case from the very beginning."

Ms. Kyoko delivered this line while still lying down—did she just figure it out now, or did she know all along?

"Are you saying it wasn't thrown from the front?"

Even when pressed by Officer Rivaldi, who wouldn't tolerate vague expressions, Ms. Kyoko remained lying there, as if sunbathing in the afternoon Central Park, and said,

"Yes. The culprit used ninja techniques."

10

"If you're living in New York, you're probably looking forward to welcoming the New Year in Times Square 'today,' but in Japan, there's a traditional New Year's activity called kite-flying—originally, it was called squid-flying in the Kansai region, but there's a legend that says ninjas used this technique for reconnaissance in other countries. It's a ninja art where, to get a bird's-eye view of a castle or battlefield from the 'Upper Region,' they would lie spread-eagle on a giant kite and observe the ground from above. Well, in this case, it would be more accurate to call it a trick."

In modern times, it would be something like using a drone to take aerial footage—while Officer Casteiz was wondering whether drones were allowed in Central Park, Ms. Kyoko continued, as a cultural advisor on Japan, and as a famous detective.

"However, it wasn't necessarily always ninjas lying spread-eagle on those kites—what if we hypothesize that the victim, Mr. Gordon Terrine, was lying spread-eagle on the ground from the start, while he was still alive? If we consider that he was struck by the poisoned shuriken in the center of his chest not before he fell backward, but after, wouldn't that change the situation entirely?"

"In other words… the culprit didn't throw the shuriken from the front, or from behind, or from the right, or the left… but dropped it from directly above?"

Officer Rivaldi asked cautiously, and the Forgetful Detective nodded, "Exactly."

"Out of local pride, I may have made kite-flying sound like it's a uniquely Japanese culture, but sports kites are also widely enjoyed in America. I don't recall what kind of filming device this 'drone' is, but flying a kite in the park wouldn't stand out too much… it's a bold trick where the culprit could kill the victim without being seen."

A blade falling from directly above—like a drone equipped with a missile. If that was the case, it made sense that Officer Rivaldi, with his military background, would make the connection so quickly—but was the policewoman overthinking it, or did Ms. Kyoko emphasize "filming device" to mislead them? Even though drone technology wasn't comparable to ninja arts, drones had been around long enough that they could hardly be considered cutting-edge… was she trying to conceal her own military experience by playing dumb?

While the other was lost in thought, the Forgetful Detective's reasoning continued to unfold. Even if it wasn't dropping from high in the sky, it was moving at a speed that would shake you off if you weren't paying attention.

"If the shuriken is dropped from directly above, there's no need for pitching skills. It would fall straight down with speed, following the acceleration of gravity… Of course, air resistance would

cause a paper shuriken to curve like a breaking ball, but with a metal shuriken, it would fall straight toward the victim's body."

"But Kyoko-san, even if he was lying on the ground, couldn't the victim avoid a shuriken falling on him? By rolling over, for example. Unless it was carpet bombing… with just one shuriken. And the sky offers an even clearer view."

Officer Rivaldi pressed for details—just like he did at the office, he seemed well-matched with the fastest detective.

"Of course, but unlike when standing upright, if the victim is lying on the ground, they don't need to be conscious. Maybe he was taking a nap in the park in the late afternoon—but it's more reasonable to think the culprit drugged him in advance, or strangled him unconscious. There are techniques like that in 'JUDO.'"

As if she had the answer ready in advance, Ms. Kyoko, who had been napping not just in the afternoon but since the morning, replied—did the culprit pretend to support the unconscious victim and carry him into the park, laying him down here? To an observer, it would look like someone leisurely reclining in the late afternoon for a rest? Indeed, that was a common sight in Central Park.

Should they re-interview the witnesses with this perspective in mind—and contact the coroner to check if any sleeping drugs other than the poison derived from Eastern plants were found in the victim, or if there were any signs of strangulation on the neck?

"But why would the culprit go to such lengths… if they drugged or strangled Mr. Terrine, they could have killed him then and there. Was there really a need to go through the trouble of killing him with a shuriken?"

"Asking why a ninja used ninjutsu is unrefined, Assistant Officer Casteiz."

Ms. Kyoko said what Officer Rivaldi likely would have—of course, asking "why go to such trouble?" about another country's tradition was unrefined, even disrespectful. Though it was pointed out by the detective rather than his superior, Officer Casteiz was left feeling dejected.

"However, asking 'Why did the culprit use a trick?' is a classic question in mysteries. Just as one climbs a mountain because it's there, a motive of 'because they're the culprit' won't satisfy seasoned readers or experienced police officers."

Ms. Kyoko followed up, as if to console her. Calling her an experienced officer—how flattering.

"As we revealed in our earlier experiment, it would be difficult to hit a standing victim with a shuriken from the front—it's reasonable to think that the perpetrator's goal was to create an

impossible crime scenario by making it seem like the victim was standing in a position where they could only be targeted from the front."

Indeed, if they thought of the victim's position and the direction of his body as intentional, it made sense that the results of the experiment weren't promising—choosing an open space in front was itself part of the plan, to make them think "they should have aimed from behind."

"However, now that we know, we're in this city of skyscrapers. There must have been people in high-rise buildings overlooking the park who could see the giant kite from above, and more importantly, if we ask Ms. Fruity Young, the real first discoverer and marriage scammer, she might testify to having seen some crucial evidence—perhaps not the kite itself, but maybe a square-shaped shadow that fell on the ground."

'So we only have to pull the thread, just like retrieving a giant kite, wouldn't you say?'—using wordplay that may be a bit hard to grasp for two officers who only knew about sport kites, the fastest detective summed up her reasoning.

Until the very end, she remained in a pose imitating a corpse—or perhaps mimicking a ninja clinging to a giant kite.

11

Ms. Kyoko's prediction that the marriage scammer, Fruity Young, who realized she had left fingerprints at the scene, would not return to her registered address turned out to be correct. She was found at a motel in Brooklyn. Brought to the station for voluntary questioning, she admitted, as expected, that she was the true first discoverer of the body and that she was indeed at the scene at that time on that day.

She claimed she had gone to the park to attend a Tai Chi seminar being held late at night in Central Park—it had nothing to do with the crime, so one could say it was the right move not to blindly suspect a former convict.

That being said, the problem started after that.

As predicted, she was indeed a witness, but what she witnessed was the complete opposite of what they had hoped—she testified that while walking along the path, she happened to glance to the side and saw Mr. Gordon Terrine standing there, doing nothing in particular, just idly standing in an open space. Suddenly, he staggered backward and fell on his back, according to the former convict.

When she instinctively ran over, she saw a shuriken embedded in his chest—she said that when she impulsively tried to pull it out, she came to her senses and realized the victim was already dead, and that she could be suspected if she stayed there, so she decided to flee.

If the poison had been fast-acting, there might have been some way to save him if it had been administered just after the shuriken struck, but whether she could be charged with involuntary manslaughter was something to be discussed with a lawyer. The confusion they, as officers, faced at the scene was her clear denial:

"A giant kite? I didn't see anything like that. Not even a shadow."

In fact, she had witnessed the moment the shuriken struck and the moment the victim fell backward—the moment that would completely invalidate Ms. Kyoko's reasoning that the victim had been lying on the ground and killed by a shuriken falling from directly above.

To add to that, there were no reports of anyone spotting a giant kite from the windows of the skyscrapers. There was no way there could have been.

Though they correctly deduced that Fruity Young was not a suspect but the first discoverer and an important witness, this correct guess ultimately ruined the main line of reasoning—what a ridiculous scenario. It was a classic case of shooting oneself in the foot—or as they said in Japanese, "HITORIZUMO."

"I knew it. I suspected that detective's reasoning from the start."

Officer Rivaldi sneered with an attitude exactly opposite to the detective's trademark line, but as usual, what he said was correct.

Hoping against hope, they questioned her over and over again, but she insisted that she only saw the victim falling from that angle. She neither saw the giant kite nor the culprit throwing the shuriken on the ground, meaning the investigation was almost back to square one—they still didn't know where the shuriken was thrown from. If the victim definitely fell backward, it must mean the shuriken was thrown from the front. But there was no place for the culprit to hide in front… a vicious cycle.

Seriously, of all things, a giant kite?

Even Officer Casteiz was swept up by the atmosphere at the time, but this was clearly an absurdly far-fetched theory.

"Kakah. Well, there's a technique used by the assassination squad 'SHINOBI' called 'Flying Squirrel Technique,' where they glide using a cloth like a giant kite, but it's widely believed that neither the 'Giant Kite Technique' nor 'Flying Squirrel Technique' was actually used."

Dejected, Officer Casteiz still had to report the outcome of this farce and called FBI Agent White Birch, who laughed as if he found the whole thing amusing.

It was no laughing matter.

Not for Officer Casteiz, nor for Officer Rivaldi—since he consistently delivered results, Officer Rivaldi had remained a top detective in the Homicide Division. For such a skilled detective to have wasted an entire day being led around by a civilian was a major failure.

A day of trial and error could lead to dire consequences.

This could be seen as the perfect opportunity to have them become window sitters. "It's no longer acceptable in modern times to scornfully refer to someone as a 'window sitter' at work. There are windows that face the sunrise too," some officer might retort, but even he wouldn't be able to dismiss the seriousness of the situation.

Even Officer Casteiz, who was considered to be in the Rivaldi camp, wouldn't come out of this unscathed… it was unfair, and it was ironic that under a partner who despised company politics more than anything, she was getting dragged into factional disputes. To think that her long-standing transfer request would be accepted in such a way.

"There's no need to be so pessimistic, Assistant Officer Casteiz. If you fail, just try again."

With a tone that suggested he was enjoying someone else's predicament, as if watching a live stream, Agent Birch said such moralistic and optimistic words—despite the fact that it was the FBI's intervention that led to the decision to request cooperation from such a suspicious detective in the first place.

"No, no. I'm enjoying this as a kind of interactive content. I'm not joking. In the Japanese mystery scene, these so-called 'master detectives' are seen as absolute, with an unspoken rule that they must never make mistakes. They're never allowed to play the role of the one who misleads or falsely accuses someone. But here in the land of freedom, in America, with its frontier spirit, a star won't be crushed over one or two failures."

It wasn't clear where Agent Birch's roots lie, but it seemed he harbors quite a few illusions about this country… after all, there was a zero-tolerance policy here.

However, now that she thought about it, she once read in a book that in Japan, Ms. Kyoko's homeland, the conviction rate for prosecuted crimes exceeded 99.9%. While it would be troubling if that led to a high rate of wrongful convictions, that conviction rate, from an American perspective, was rather terrifying—it seemed that Japan's criminal justice system compensated with a high rate of non-prosecution, but still.

"Kyoko Okitegami's exhaustive reasoning covers all possibilities, which means she can sometimes be wrong. Rather, you could say that by eliminating the wrong answers, she gets one step closer to the correct one."

"I understand what you're saying. But realistically, Ms. Kyoko herself wouldn't accept another request. Anyone would decline. After all, a deduction that was so confidently presented turned out to be completely off the mark… It wouldn't be surprising if she decided to retire from the detective business out of sheer embarrassment."

In fact, even Officer Casteiz, who merely went along with it, was so embarrassed that she seriously considered writing a resignation letter instead of a transfer request.

"That's right. Normally, a proud detective wouldn't be able to endure such a grandiose failure. But she's not normal—the Forgetful Detective is not your average detective. Trust me, go visit her one more time tomorrow morning. She'll have completely forgotten about the giant kite deduction she presented to you and will greet you cheerfully…"

The Forgetful Detective had a reset button.

That was what Agent Birch recommended.

12

More out of resignation than trust for that man, Officer Casteiz and Officer Rivaldi visited the Okitegami Detective Agency's New York branch, an old, dilapidated apartment, for the third time the next morning—just as Agent Birch had predicted, Ms. Kyoko greeted the two with a smile and offered them coffee.

Having completely forgotten the conversations and life-risking experiments from the day before.

As an aside, that did quite a number on their already weakened spirits… even though it didn't bear fruit, they had risked their lives together, yet it felt as if no bond or sense of unity had formed, as if their international connection had been severed.

In reality, she had simply forgotten, but still, it felt unfair, like being left with a one-sided crush… The policewoman had thought it was unusual for a young foreign woman to live alone in New York, but perhaps the Forgetful Detective wasn't suited for a shared house.

Relationships were automatically severed.

For Officer Rivaldi, who was concerned about disconnection and division, this might have been a visit with much on his mind, but now wasn't the time to delve into the living conditions of illegal immigrants from Japan—whether such a time would ever come was another matter entirely, but the purpose of the visit was to request cooperation in the investigation and to explain the outline of the murder case.

Following Agent Birch's advice, they made sure to incorporate early on the witness testimony of the true first discoverer, Mr. Fruity Young, to prevent the reasoning from drifting off in the same direction as it did yesterday—

"Ahaha, the 'Giant Kite Technique'? That's way too tricky, even as a trick. I can't believe you considered that possibility with a straight face."

Ms. Kyoko was highly amused by her own reasoning. No, she was laughing without realizing it was her own reasoning… Indeed, with this mindset, she was free from any awkwardness or guilt over a failed deduction.

The ultimate reset mentality.

At the same time, it was a mental reset—since the memory itself wasn't stored in the brain but in the body, she didn't forget how to fold origami or how to throw a shuriken.

…Even so, every time they saw her, she was wearing different clothes, whether it was loungewear or something else, but where in this rundown apartment was she storing all of them? Did she put away the windbreaker she bought yesterday in there as well?

"Well, I'm sorry to rush you, Ms. Kyoko, but shall we head to the crime scene right away—?"

"No, here is fine."

Ms. Kyoko stopped Officer Casteiz, who was about to stand up after finishing the coffee, with her right hand—'oh, I see, her behavior pattern is already different from yesterday,' the officer thought, when—

"I'm sorry. I thought it might be rude to interrupt halfway through, so I listened to everything, but the truth is, I read about this case in the newspaper this morning."

She pointed to the wall of the room—there, splashed across the front page, was a large article titled "JAPANESE SHURIKEN MURDER CASE in CENTRAL PARK." Surrounding it were various newspaper articles in different languages, all dealing with the same case, stuck up on the wall like a mind map.

It was only expected that some information had been made public, and it made it into the morning papers—at first glance, it didn't seem like the article mentioned the detectives' failures during the investigation.

"I happened to wake up early today. When I read the newspaper, I saw that some incident had occurred in Central Park, so out of intellectual curiosity as a detective, I decided to go for a walk."

"Huh—"

She says she "happened to wake up early," but that was probably because she took a nap yesterday… For Officer Casteiz, who had been up almost all night dealing with the aftermath and stress of the failure, this was just another story that made her feel like telling the detective to stop sleeping so soundly, but the white-haired woman had already finished her walk in Central Park anyways.

Moreover, not to read a book, but as a detective—this suspicious Japanese woman wandering around the park had already finished her examination of the crime scene before the detectives even arrived at her home.

She was the fastest detective, accelerating every time they met.

Of course, there was a limit to the information that could be obtained from newspapers sold to the general public… Therefore, it seemed she decided to listen to Officer Casteiz' summary, which included Ms. Fruity Young's eyewitness account, until the end.

"So, did you find anything?"

Officer Rivaldi, still harboring doubts about the detective, pressed Ms. Kyoko with a piercing gaze—Ms. Kyoko, with a composed expression, nodded and said, "Yes, I did."

She found something? She couldn't have possibly conducted a proper shuriken-throwing experiment by herself, could she?

"Even if we dismiss the unique idea of a giant kite, it seems equally nonsensical to assume the shuriken was thrown from the front in that open space, which is likely the crime scene—after all, the marriage scammer saw the victim fall but didn't see the culprit at the moment the shuriken was thrown."

The Forgetful Detective, fresh off presenting that very outlandish deduction just yesterday, began speaking with a cup of coffee in hand—what kind of reasoning would Ms. Kyoko offer today?

"There's a ninja technique called 'Suiton no Jutsu,' 'the art of water-escape'."

What?

Was she heading in the same direction?

"It doesn't make sense to throw it from the path on the left, where someone might pass by at any moment, so how about considering that it was thrown from the pond on the right?"

"S-Suiton no Jutsu, you say?"

Officer Rivaldi was dumbfounded… Judging by his response, it seems he hadn't heard of that ninja technique in Okinawa either.

"Yes. By the way, during wartime in Japan, there was a dish made by kneading flour with water and boiling it, but I'm not talking about that 'suiton.'"

She spoke about the secret techniques of ninjas while weaving in knowledge about the war she despised—today, too, she was a Japanese advisor.

"This ninja technique has a bit more realism than the 'Giant Kite Technique'—basically, it's scuba diving from the Sengoku period. It's a technique where you bite into a bamboo snorkel, dive into a moat, and infiltrate the castle using traditional swimming methods."

Officer Casteiz would have liked to hear a bit more about traditional swimming methods, but she understood the general idea—the scuba diving analogy should have been easy enough for Officer Rivaldi, who had served in Okinawa, to grasp. So, the culprit was hiding in the pond on the right, from the victim's perspective?

"Yes. I thought that the shuriken, being wet from the water, would have a smoother throw, and while it wouldn't be as extreme as a boomerang, I considered that it might make a near-right-angle turn."

That way of thinking seemed like a foul ball, if not a spitball, but throwing a shuriken from the water to the side of the victim would certainly be in the victim's blind spot—could they have lured the victim to face forward by some means, while the culprit waited underwater with a snorkel, or perhaps a periscope, for the right moment? And then, deliberately timed it so there would be someone on the promenade who could become a witness…

"Yes, exactly. If someone witnesses the victim falling backward after being struck by a shuriken from the front, despite no one being there, it creates the perfect impossible crime."

Since the culprit was underwater, there would be no risk of being seen… but wouldn't they have to surface at the moment of throwing? In that case, wouldn't they end up facing the witness walking along the path head-on? Even if it was a foul ball with some expected curve, it wasn't like firing a torpedo.

There were many other problems, and whether or not the assassination squad 'SHINOBI' actually used such a technique, it seemed to be just as unrealistic as the 'Giant Kite Technique.' This one wasn't soaring through the skies, maybe because it was full of holes.

"Yes, you're absolutely right. Up to this point, it's just a groundless reasoning I've thought up in my head. So, I actually tested it."

This detective loved her experiments too much.

She may seem graceful, but she was quite the go-getter… But wait, hold on, what did she do? Had she seriously taken a swim in the Central Park pond in a swimsuit this morning?

"I didn't go that far. But I did wade in with waders and did a bit of dredging—*giggle*, in Japanese, what I just said could be construed as a confession of a crime in front of an officer."

No, it was a confession of a crime in English, too.

She had brazenly disturbed the crime scene—even their proud NYPD forensics team hadn't examined the pond yet. It was far from the scene, and normally, no one would think the culprit would have been hiding there.

"Did you find the culprit's footprints at the bottom of the pond?"

"Unfortunately, no. But I did make a discovery—something like this got caught in the net."

Ms. Kyoko, who had apparently even used a net, took out a newspaper-wrapped package from her side—just how far did she go with using newspapers, Officer Casteiz thought, but then she was twice as surprised when she saw what was inside.

Naturally, it wasn't a bagel wrapped up—it was a shuriken, made of iron.

"This is my version of an evidence bag."

Ms. Kyoko proudly said, but that wasn't the point—it wasn't just a 'secret reveal'; she had essentially handed over the murder weapon herself. No, wait, when they first visited this room, Officer Rivaldi had quickly confirmed that there were no shuriken inside. Besides, the murder weapon should be securely stored at the station—this shuriken wasn't the one stuck in the victim's chest.

"Yes, but it is a murder weapon. It's the other half of the murder weapon."

Making a big deal of it despite being the fastest detective, Ms. Kyoko held the shuriken between sheets of newspaper and showed it to the two detectives.

Since it had been submerged underwater, there was no need to worry about fingerprints, so she was probably holding it like that simply because the blade was dangerous… or maybe it was a precaution against poison… oh?

Looking at it up close, the policewoman noticed that the side of the shuriken had a large scratch on it. It looked like it had been strongly scraped by some metal, leaving a straight line. This, in its own way, was a classic example of an emery ball, but—

"…What does this mean? Are you saying the culprit didn't kill the victim with a single, perfectly aimed throw, but rather missed, and one of the shurikens flew wildly off course and fell into the pond?"

Or could it have been a spare shuriken that the culprit accidentally dropped while scuba diving…? No, but in that case, there should have been footprints at the bottom of the pond… she was reluctant to have the forensics team check it after a private detective had already tampered with the scene, but if there was a possibility that the 'Suiton no Jutsu' had been used, should they?

"No, no, I don't think the 'Suiton no Jutsu' was used. It's too much of a fantasy."

Ms. Kyoko, as if she had dozed off without realizing it, began to deny the reasoning she had just mentioned a moment ago—moreover, what she said next was:

"I believe the culprit was hiding in the bushes behind the victim."

It was a conclusion that, for a logical deduction, was all too ordinary.

Did the FBI agent really introduce the New York detectives to an illegal immigrant detective twice just to hear such a straightforward deduction? To be honest, the policewoman felt disappointed, but it seemed Officer Rivaldi didn't see it that way.

"…A ricochet?"

He muttered in what seemed like astonishment.

The skilled detective always understood quickly—but a ricochet?

Why would such a term come up here? This wasn't a steel-framed building, it was Central Park. It wasn't the kind of environment where bullets would ricochet. Besides, no firearms were used in this case.

"Yes. So, it wasn't a bullet ricochet, but rather a shuriken ricochet. The shuriken thrown from behind was made to ricochet, making a U-turn like a boomerang."

"Come on, Ms. Kyoko, it's the same with shurikens. In such a wide-open space, there's no wall for the shuriken to bounce off—"

"They also threw a wall. A shuriken that acted as a wall."

Ms. Kyoko said matter-of-factly.

"Two shurikens were thrown almost simultaneously, with shuriken A bouncing off shuriken B. The scratch on shuriken B occurred during that collision—in front of the victim's eyes, the two shurikens collided. Shuriken B, which acted as the wall, changed its trajectory and plopped into the distant pond. Shuriken A, which ricocheted, also changed its trajectory and stabbed straight into the victim's chest."

Officer Casteiz wasn't used to assigning letters like A and B to shuriken, but the explanation was annoyingly easy to understand.

"…It's something you could never do with a gun. A bullet is cylindrical, so it can't act as a wall. It's hard to predict where a ricocheted bullet would fly."

"Yes. That's why the culprit, in a rather unconventional choice, used a shuriken as the weapon. A shuriken, which has no grip and is composed entirely of blades, looks like a flat surface with no bumps when viewed from the side as it flies—shuriken B, spinning vertically, could indeed act as a wall for shuriken A, spinning horizontally. The inevitable necessity of using ninjutsu—an art long thought extinct in this Manhattan—was there, transcending time and potentially sparking an international incident."

Ms. Kyoko revealed her hand in that way—and its back had no shuriken on it, if one recalled its original meaning.

13

Despite the fleeting image of a switch-pitcher who threw with an overhand right arm and a sidearm left arm coming to mind for a moment, it turned out that was expecting too much. The culprits were a pair of murderers. Normally, one would think the one who threw shuriken A would be the mastermind, and the one who threw shuriken B would be the accomplice—except, in reality, it wasn't even accurate to say they "threw" or "launched" the shuriken.

To shatter the dream, what was used was an AI-equipped pitching machine disguised as a single-lens reflex camera on a tripod—the two culprits hid in the bushes behind the victim, positioning themselves at an angle where they formed an equilateral triangle rather than directly behind him, and just like pressing a shutter, they pressed the button to launch the shurikens—then, the computers in the two machines, linked by encrypted communication, controlled the ricochet in front of the victim's eyes as planned. The superhuman feat of making one shuriken collide with another flying at high speed in midair was not a lost ninja technique but rather the latest in electronic technology. If that was the case, they probably wanted to avoid having the moment of the murder witnessed, but it seemed they couldn't choose the timing of the launch as they pleased… Still, since the shuriken was launched by a machine rather than a

human, it would have been difficult to visually track it with the naked eye, so it would have been a flaw that could be overlooked.

Moreover, the fact that the shuriken happened to stab into the heart was just by chance. Shuriken A had been coated with poison so that it would be lethal no matter where it struck the body—the choice of using an oriental poison was probably just to match the shuriken weapon.

It had all gone according to plan, even down to shuriken B, which served as evidence of the ricochet trick, flying into the pond on the right and getting hidden at the bottom, but the culprits hadn't anticipated the presence of a suspicious Japanese woman who frequented Central Park—despite using shurikens, they probably didn't even know about the 'Suiton no Jutsu.'

They had caused confusion, but once it reached this point, things moved quickly, even without the fastest detective… There was no way a custom-made pitching machine that launched shurikens wouldn't leave any trace. It was the kind of scenario where the master detective's critique of every mystery novel, "Wouldn't it have been harder to get caught if they had just killed the person normally?" rang true.

The culprits, who pretended to be clients and lured Gordon Terrine to Central Park by specifying the time and place, were his wife, Mrs. Lou Terrine, and his son, Mr. Ansa Terrine—given that they were family, the fact that they had to pretend to be clients in order to get Mr. Terrine to come to the park directly related to the motive for the murder.

Protecting their inheritance.

That's what the two reportedly told Officer Rivaldi in the interrogation room, but personally, Officer Casteiz thought it would be difficult for them to win an acquittal with that plea… In any case, unlike Ms. Kyoko, an illegal immigrant, they were American citizens, so there was no longer any risk of the shuriken murder case escalating into an international incident—just knowing that was enough to let out a small sigh of relief.

FBI Agent Birch, who received the report, didn't seem particularly impressed by the resolution of the Forgetful Detective's first case in New York, simply nodding and saying, "Of course, of course." He was a small man who found more pleasure in failures, making him unrewarding to report to.

"If any more strange cases come up, don't hesitate to rely on her. Home is where you hang your hat, as they say, and where there's a detective, there's a case—she'll surely be able to help you out."

That was his recommendation, but it was no joke. Sure, she had exposed the trick based on her unique insight, but at one point, the officer had even considered looking for a new job. This time, it was just a one-time favor because the federal agent covered all the expenses as part of a first-time free offer.

Officer Casteiz was already struggling enough babysitting her hotshot superior, and she wasn't about to let this detective stir up the investigation any further before her transfer request was approved—firmly renewing that resolve, she ended the call with Agent Birch, but no sooner had she done so did Officer Rivaldi call as if to crush that fleeting resolve.

Wondering if the word "babysitting" she had used internally was inappropriate in this day and age, she anxiously answered the phone.

"There's been a report that a giant kite is caught on the torch of the Statue of Liberty—head to the scene immediately. I'm still on the boat, but from what I can see through binoculars, it looks like a human corpse is tied in a spread-eagle position to the kite."

That was the content of the call.

She didn't need a stern look from the skilled detective to remind herself that the days when New York was called a crime city were now long forgotten, but even so, where there was a detective, there was always a case.

There was nothing Officer Casteiz could say for certain without seeing the scene with his own eyes, but it seemed that, at least one more time, they would have to ask the Forgetful Detective to take on her "first job" at least once more.

"Kyoko Okitegami's Shuriken" — Forgotten

第二話　掟上今日子の兵糧丸

Ch 2: Kyoko Okitegami’s Hyoro-Gan

1

Since Assistant Officer Casteiz was from California—not from Los Angeles, but from San Jose—she didn’t really think of New York, where she currently lived, as that big of a city. In fact, she believed that almost everything New York had could also be found in California—though she would never dare say such a thing in front of her superior, Officer Rivaldi. At the very least, when she had moved to the East Coast for college, she didn’t feel like she was finally stepping into the big city. She believed there was plenty of splendor back in her hometown. Even though it hadn’t yielded any gold, she considered it to be doing quite well. This sentiment and perspective hadn’t really changed even now, after she began working for the NYPD. However, there was one thing that she had to admit New York had that her hometown didn’t, something that could only be found in New York—Broadway.

It was the famous theater district that attracted tourists not only from across the country but from around the world.

Geographers might point out that there was technically a street with the same name in L.A. (and probably all over America), but that didn’t mean California had its own Broadway. Although she had been too busy with work and her boss to visit it lately, Officer Casteiz used to frequent the place during her student days—when she was really into it, she would scour everything from Off-Broadway to Off-Off-Broadway with cheap tickets. It was a little embarrassing to think about now, but back then, the name "Stage-Door Casteiz" had been a bit of a thing.

"You know, I wonder about the use of the word ‘off,’ Assistant Officer Casteiz. You might intend to claim it as culture or tradition, but when you distinguish streets as ‘on’ or ‘off,’ ‘front’ or ‘back,’ it just seems like a recipe for segregation. I can’t really see it positively," said Officer Rivaldi.

Officer Casteiz (and "Stage-Door Casteiz" of the past) never thought she’d hear such words from her boss on Broadway itself, but when a murder happened on Broadway, as a homicide detective with the NYPD, she couldn’t just ignore it.

A murder on Broadway.

And not just any murder—one that happened during a performance on stage.

It was a case that seemed so staged and overly dramatic that one might suspect it was an elaborate publicity stunt, given the cutthroat nature of the theater world. And, despite the inappropriate feeling that she herself had become a character in a play, when she actually arrived at the scene with her human-rights-minded boss, it turned out that the situation wasn’t as dramatic as she had imagined.

There was no dramatic orchestral background music.

If Officer Casteiz were a member of the audience, she would have been disappointed—no, if she were the person she used to be, she might have been more fascinated by that oddity, by the fact that it wasn't following the classic path. Such was the complexity of a fan's psychology.

First of all, though it was a murder on stage, the victim wasn't a lead actor—though it wasn't language one would use in front of the human-rights-minded inspector, the victim was what you might call a bit-part dancer. Her name—Randyl Rascuette—was so minor that it took some effort to find it in the program. The font couldn't have been any smaller.

In the beginning, no one had thought her death was a murder—when Randyl collapsed face-first in the middle of a line dance, everyone just assumed it was a case of poor health. The performance continued without her—whether you call it culture or tradition, that's just how it was. The show must go on, even if one of the bit parts drops out.

However, Randyl was taken to the hospital where she passed away without regaining consciousness—not even for a moment. She was only twenty-four years old.

The cause of death was malnutrition.

To put it bluntly, she starved to death.

It stood to reason that dancing and singing, sometimes intensely, sometimes gracefully, under immense pressure on an empty stomach could lead to collapse, even death. Still, starving to death in that city of excess, New York, was horrific.

No, one might say it was a death unique to New York, unique to Broadway—there was a certain tragic poetry to starving to death on a brightly lit, glamorous stage.

Some news outlets had the gall to suggest that dying on stage during a performance was a fitting end for a performer, but that was something you'd say about a lead actor. As a young actor just starting out, it must have been an unwanted death, Officer Casteiz thought nostalgically when she heard the story.

As a dancer performing in front of people, was it malnutrition due to a harsh diet? Or was it starvation due to the financial struggles of an aspiring dancer? Either way, if it were just that, there wouldn't be any criminal implications—though it was certainly a big deal that someone died on Broadway, but as far as the homicide officer was concerned, there wasn't much she could do.

A tragic yet ironic tale of modern times, where food was abundant. Case closed—if she were her old self, she might have called it a tragicomedy.

However, the suspicion that this wasn’t merely a tragedy or comedy, but a murder mystery, arose after a forensic autopsy was performed at the request of the bereaved family. From the corner of Randyl Rascuette’s stomach, which was thought to be completely empty, a mysterious substance was detected.

"Mysterious" in this case meant that it was impossible to analyze—though it was called a substance, the possibility that it was a poison couldn't be ruled out.

Was the bit-part actress poisoned?

Had she been murdered, disguised as an accident—disguised as a "professional hazard" like starvation or malnutrition?

If that were the case, it was undoubtedly the NYPD's time to shine—it wasn’t a scandalous slapstick comedy to be watched from the audience with opera glasses; they had to take the stage.

And so, Officer Casteiz found herself visiting Broadway for the first time in a long time. While she felt burdened by the prospect of guiding her boss, who was clearly out of his element in such a flamboyant setting, fortunately they already had one lead in the investigation.

Among the belongings of the victim—though at this point, she was only a "possible" victim—was a memo pad containing what seemed to be the keyword for the substance detected in her stomach, listed as the name of a supplement.

It read:

"HYORO-GAN."

2

"Nice to meet you. I’m Kyoko Okitegami, a detective,"

That sudden greeting, accompanied by a bow that seemed typically Japanese, was directed at Officer Casteiz and Officer Rivaldi, but this wasn’t the first time they had visited this young woman with white hair and glasses, who lived in a historically old and decaying apartment building—though they wouldn’t go so far as to call themselves regulars, they’d become familiar enough with the area that they no longer needed to use GPS to find their way.

Even Officer Rivaldi, who was stubbornly opposed to the idea of law enforcement seeking investigative assistance from a private citizen—especially one who was a mysterious, illegal immigrant from Japan—seemed to have grown accustomed to it. At the very least, the stiff-necked, skilled detective had come to acknowledge Kyoko Okitegami, if not as a detective, then at least as an advisor on Japanese culture.

Of course, that was just on their side—the NYPD's side, and also on the side of the FBI, which patronized the Okitegami Detective Agency's New York branch—but from the perspective of the Forgetful Detective, whose memory reset every day, no matter how many times they visited, even if it were their thousandth visit, it would still be a "Nice to meet you."

"Oh my, to think that I could be questioned by the prestigious NYPD, which I admire as much as Scotland Yard—I must have really made something of myself,"

she said, ushering them inside with her usual spiel—though it seemed overly careless for someone supposedly under a kind of witness protection, they had grown accustomed to her carefree openness.

Whether it was something to get used to or not was debatable, but the fashionable way she dressed differently every time they met was certainly consistent—as was the question of where in this old, decaying apartment building she managed to keep such a walk-in closet.

Could she be hiding a black hole somewhere?

The walls, full of holes and crumbling away, were covered with newspapers from various countries, seemingly to conceal the damage. Since their last visit, the newspapers had been completely updated—Officer Casteiz found herself habitually searching for articles related to the cases she was currently investigating.

The Broadway murder case… No, it hadn't been publicly announced as a murder yet, so perhaps the Broadway starvation case? However, it didn't seem to have made it to any major headlines, and by the time she sat on the sofa, she hadn't spotted any such headlines.

"I'll just brew some coffee, so please wait a moment."

"No, thank you, Kyoko-san. We're fine."

Rivaldi politely declined the offer of a drink, addressing her as "Kyoko-san"—neither "Ms. Kyoko" nor "Mrs. Kyoko." His attitude suggested a principle of not accepting anything, even a glass of water, from anyone outside the organization with whom there might be a conflict of interest. However, within the investigation headquarters, he never allowed anyone else to make coffee for him.

The task of serving tea had been thoroughly abolished when he became an inspector—what was it they called it in Japanese? "Chabozu?" It was an oddly harsh term for a country known for the practice of "SADO," the japanese tea ceremony.

In that sense, the strong, sleep-banishing coffee served at the Okitegami Detective Agency should actually match Officer Rivaldi's tastes, Officer Casteiz thought, but it seemed he judged that there was no time to enjoy it now.

For someone as cautious as Rivaldi, a man who would typically stop to examine every pebble in his path, it was quite unusual—he was in a hurry with this investigation. Of course, his partner and chaperone, Officer Casteiz, felt exactly the same way as her superior.

After all, as the investigation progressed, it became clear that the number of victims might increase at any moment, and it wouldn't be surprising if there were several—all due to that supplement, "HYORO-GAN."

And yet, tonight, the show must go on—the Broadway stage would open. The curtain would never fall. The standing ovation would continue.

The truth needed to be uncovered as quickly as possible.

No matter how high Officer Rivaldi's sense of professional duty was, it was inevitable that he would seek the help of the fastest detective—although, once again, speed wasn't the only thing they wanted from Ms. Kyoko this time.

They were seeking the opinion of a Japanese culture advisor.

They were seeking her expert opinion, just as they had asked for her opinion regarding a uniquely Japanese weapon when they first met.

"Ms. Kyoko. In your home country of Japan, is there any poison called 'HYORO-GAN' that is used by the assassination unit 'SHINOBI,' similar to the 'SHURIKEN' from that previous case?"

At Officer Casteiz' probing question, Ms. Kyoko tilted her head adorably, looking somewhat puzzled—it was a gesture that probably wouldn't sit well with Officer Rivaldi, but perhaps Officer Casteiz had not phrased her question properly. After all, Ms. Kyoko had no memory of assisting in the investigation of that case.

A detective who maintained absolute confidentiality.

FBI Agent White Birch had described her that way—he explained that this was precisely why the Forgetful Detective had been highly valued by various investigative agencies in Japan.

Although she was now in New York State, where detectives were subject to stricter legal obligations, it seemed that this characteristic hadn't changed—her achievement in solving the "Shuriken Murder Case" had already been reset in her mind.

It wasn't recorded in any official documents.

If that was the case, then Ms. Kyoko probably didn’t remember anything about the "Statue of Liberty Incident," where a young man had tried to chain the statue with a massive chain right after that case—during that incident, another unique weapon favored by the assassination unit "SHINOBI," a "KUSARIGAMA," had been used.

And now they had "HYORO-GAN" on their hands.

"‘Hyoro-Gan,’ you say?"

Ms. Kyoko said this, still tilting her head.

She seemed to be acting clueless, but her brain had already begun to work at high speed… and it was fast.

"Indeed, as you feared, that is a term related to ninjas—as you two have come across the term ‘Hyoro-Gan’ in the course of your ongoing investigation of a murder case, you’ve come to me, a Japanese person, for consultation? Or are you suspecting me?"

Despite having no memory of assisting in the resolution of the past two cases, she had an impressively quick understanding—though this time, unlike the previous two cases, they weren’t actually suspecting Ms. Kyoko, the illegal immigrant from Japan.

Since the fastest detective's deductions were always speed-oriented, one couldn’t expect the thoroughness of a Sherlock Holmes—listening carefully, one would notice that her reasoning was a little rough around the edges.

Incidentally, it was none other than Officer Rivaldi who had identified "HYORO-GAN," found in the victim’s memo, as a term related to the assassination unit "SHINOBI"—having been stationed at a base in Okinawa Prefecture during his brief military service before becoming a police officer, he had some knowledge of Japanese culture.

However, one had to wonder what kind of military life this skilled detective had led… given the time period, he shouldn’t have experienced any wars, but he rarely spoke of his past.

"I see. I’m surprised you know about Hyoro-Gan. It’s not that famous of a shinobi tool, even in Japan,"

Ms. Kyoko said, with a preface that could have been either flattery or genuine, before continuing in the same soft tone, "However…"

According to the FBI agent, Ms. Kyoko had learned English along with French in Africa, and her pronunciation was impeccable—not that anyone would point out any flaws; even if she had forgotten how she learned it, it was clear that she hadn't forgotten the language itself.

"Hyoro-Gan isn't a weapon. It's more of a portable food."

"A portable food? Like rations?"

When Officer Rivaldi rephrased it using military terminology, frowning slightly, Ms. Kyoko responded, "Yes, to begin with, 'hyoro' is a kind of military ration," further rephrasing it as "military food."

"It could be considered emergency food, or trail food. In terms of American culture, it's more like an energy bar."

"…Is it something like a supplement?"

Officer Casteiz, who had no military experience, asked while recalling the victim's scribbled notes, to which Ms. Kyoko replied,

"Not exactly, but it's not far off. However, that might slightly change the original nuance."

As a cultural bridge, Ms. Kyoko avoided making definitive statements—unlike her head-tilting gesture, this was the correct behavior in front of Officer Rivaldi. In front of him, every word should be prefaced with "maybe."

"So it's not a poison for assassination?"

Officer Rivaldi confirmed—as the lead investigator, it was a natural question, but he also wanted to correct any misconceptions he might have had about Japanese culture.

Considering his age, it was a flexible attitude, but he was still a difficult person.

"Yes, I can guarantee that."

Ms. Kyoko assured him, practically giving her seal of approval, in a manner befitting someone from a stamp-culture country—though her lifestyle in New York, where she lived alone, made her seem like she could have been born in America with citizenship, she still exuded a certain aura of being a mysterious illegal immigrant.

"To begin with, Japan's assassination unit 'SHINOBI' was wiped out over a hundred years ago."

That was true.

She said that every time—if this advisor weren't the Forgetful Detective, she would have been exasperated enough to say "How many times do I have to tell you?"

"Hmm. But the image of an assassination unit and the image of portable food don't quite align… So, does that mean it's like a 'BENTO' lunch box?"

Perhaps to avoid making further mistakes, Officer Rivaldi said this in an even lower voice than usual—"BENTO"? That was a Japanese word Officer Casteiz hadn't heard before.

"Yes, it's something like that."

Though it probably wasn't quite the same, Teach Kyoko's kindness was in first acknowledging the student's attempt—this was how a cultural bridge should be. Depending on the situation, it might lead to misunderstandings or create stereotypes about Japanese people.

"However, unlike 'BENTO,' Hyoro-Gan is too small to fit in a box. Since it's used during covert operations like an assassination mission—what the NYPD might call undercover work—you can't afford to carry any extra baggage. Additionally, it's assumed that during infiltration, there may be situations where you can't move freely, let alone have time to eat a proper meal—you won't be able to spread out a lunch mat. In such cases, what's essential is food that is as small as possible yet provides maximum satisfaction. Such a dream item, beloved by 'SHINOBI' alongside shuriken and ninja swords, is the Hyoro-Gan."

"Let me illustrate," Ms. Kyoko said as she suddenly rolled up her left sleeve—there, it was already written:

'I am Kyoko Okitegami. Detective.

My memory resets every day.

Currently residing illegally in New York City.'

This was the only handwritten ID of this mysterious Japanese person, who carried no other form of identification… The wording seemed to have changed slightly since the last time they had seen it, indicating that she rewrote it frequently. Even though this was a rundown apartment, it seemed it had at least a shower room, so that made sense, but still, to boldly write "residing illegally" by hand was quite something.

It was like a criminal confession, or as they might say in a mystery novel, the criminal's memoir.

Next to that ID, Ms. Kyoko drew a black circle with a magic marker she produced from somewhere, as if by magic.

It was a perfect black circle (●), with Officer Casteiz impressed by how she could draw such a perfect circle freehand on skin, which wasn't a flat surface. Naturally, one expected that she would now proceed to draw a more complex diagram, but that was the end of Ms. Kyoko's sketch.

"This is life-size. Though I don’t remember ever seeing the real thing."

"Huh…"

Officer Rivaldi stared intently at the black circle on her left arm—while the distance might be a bit too close for comfort when gazing at a woman’s arm, there was no way a skilled detective like him had any ulterior motives.

"It looks a bit bigger than a typical supplement, doesn’t it...? What do you think, Assistant Officer Casteiz?"

Why did he assume the policewoman was a supplement enthusiast?

Despite the stress of working with such a difficult superior, she had only gone as far as counseling, and hadn’t yet been prescribed any medication…

Ignoring the lead investigator, Officer Casteiz dared to press on,

"So, this is what ninjas used as a kind of complete nutrition food?"

"Calling it a complete nutrition food is an exaggeration, more like a myth. It’s said that eating just one would allow you to function for about ten days, but it's unlikely they were as effective as ‘Senzu beans’."

"‘Senzu beans’?"

"They're key items from a legendary Japanese comic book. There are translated versions available, so please do read it."

Although introducing Japanese culture was what they had asked for… legendary, huh.

Well, if such a complete nutrition food existed, hunger would have been eradicated from the world, and one of the 17 goals of the SDGs would be achieved.

"Yes, I understand. In my home country of Japan, food issues are also considered a societal problem. There’s the episode of the starvation siege at Tottori Castle…"

Officer Casteiz couldn't help but think that this sounded more like a history lesson than a social issue. However, unlike the shuriken or the now-defunct assassination unit ‘SHINOBI,’ it was precisely because the legend of Hyoro-Gan as a starvation remedy was dubious that it had become the center of this case.

It had turned into a murder case.

"In reality, it’s believed to have been more like sucking on candy to stave off hunger—in fact, in Wakayama Prefecture, next to Mie Prefecture, famous for its ninja villages, there’s a specialty called Nachiguro Candy…"

"Yes, Kyoko-san, but let's stick with Mie Prefecture for now," said Officer Rivaldi. Apparently that was supposed to be the ninjas' turf.

The fastest detective had been outpaced.

There was no room for detours to Tottori Prefecture or Wakayama Prefecture.

"The reason being, regardless of its original purpose, it’s a fact that someone has died because of this ‘HYORO-GAN.’ Whether it was the direct cause or a contributing factor… Have you heard about the Broadway dancer who died?"

This wasn’t something one would typically ask the Forgetful Detective, but Ms. Kyoko nodded and said, "Ah, that case," before pointing to the wall. The wall covered with newspapers.

"It was mentioned in a small article in the corner of the newspaper posted there. It didn’t detail the cause of death, though—so I assume they passed away from malnutrition or something?"

Although Officer Casteiz hadn’t noticed it when they first entered the room, looking in the direction the other pointed, she saw that indeed, there was a small mention of the ongoing investigation—so small that it was hard to make out from a distance. It seemed they hadn’t even revealed the victim’s name, let alone the cause of death.

She recalled the font size used on the pamphlet.

She had heard that in Japan, they could write on grains of rice… since this was about Broadway, she would have expected more sensationalized coverage on TV and online. But perhaps that was the essence of "newspapers."

"Yes, they’re the watchdog of society."

"Is that how newspapers are referred to in Japan?"

That image hadn’t really crossed the ocean, but it seemed they had a more journalistic culture than the policewoman thought—anyway.

"The name of the victim who died on stage was Randyl Rascuette. The cause of death, as you suspected, was malnutrition, but the autopsy revealed an unidentified substance in her stomach. Based on a note left by the victim, it’s presumed to be a substance called ‘HYORO-GAN.’"

"It doesn’t seem like a straightforward case where the ‘HYORO-GAN’ was poisonous, does it?"

"No. The cause of death was malnutrition, and at first, it was considered an accident. Even after the mysterious substance was found, the investigation continued from both the angles of an accident and a crime—"

In the course of the investigation, a terrifying fact had been uncovered. Officer Casteiz might not have known what kind of box a ‘BENTO’ was, but she was starting to feel like they had opened Pandora’s box.

"—As we continued our inquiries around Broadway, we discovered that at least three other stage actors had recently died under similar circumstances due to malnutrition."

Though they hadn't died on stage, one collapsed at home, another in a hospital, and one during a dance lesson, all of whom never got up again—though they were all treated as deaths under unusual circumstances, none of them had undergone an autopsy.

However, after examining their belongings and taking testimonies from those around them, it became clear that each of the three had, in some form, left behind a word in this world—a word that was almost like a dying message: ‘HYORO-GAN.’

"…So, including Randyl, there are four victims who are believed to have ingested Hyoro-Gan?"

"At the very least. The investigation is still ongoing, so the number of victims could increase… and it’s possible there might be more in the future."

Officer Rivaldi said in a heavy tone—this was the reason why this superior was rushing the investigation. It was already a serial murder case, even a mass murder case, and it wouldn’t be surprising if yet another dancer collapsed from malnutrition at any moment.

There was no time to leisurely drink coffee.

They didn't need caffeine; the case itself was enough to keep them wide awake.

"Hyoro-Gan as the missing link. I see, I see. How intriguing… and how dark."

"Strictly speaking, we can’t be certain the other three had ingested ‘HYORO-GAN,’ but we’re currently applying for permission to exhume the bodies for autopsy."

"Exhume…?"

For a moment, Ms. Kyoko looked puzzled, but then, as if understanding, she smiled and said, "Ah, that’s right. Burials are more common here, aren’t they?"

"In Japan, cremation is the norm, so it’s difficult to perform an autopsy after the funeral. That’s why I was confused. From a detective’s perspective, it fundamentally changes the way investigations are conducted… I’d like to remember that, if I could. Anyway, it seems there’s no doubt that ‘HYORO-GAN,’ a mysterious concoction even to the Japanese, is spreading around the Broadway community."

"Yes. There’s no other connection between the victims."

If there is anything common among the four of them, it's that as dancers, they were still minor players. But then again, star dancers are rare by definition. They're stars because they're exceptional. The theaters they mainly performed at were different, and they didn’t have any experience working together, nor did they have any connections on social media.

"It’s possible to think that all four of them were taking the same drug called ‘HYORO-GAN’ as a treatment for malnutrition… but it doesn’t seem like something you could buy at a drugstore. And they didn’t all have the same doctor, did they?"

"If there was such a doctor, that person would undoubtedly be a member of the assassination unit ‘SHINOBI,’" Officer Rivaldi said solemnly.

"From what you've told us so far, Kyoko-san, I’m inclined to suspect the opposite: that it was because they took ‘HYORO-GAN’ that the women became malnourished. It may not be toxic, but if it also had no medicinal effect…"

A Hyoro-Gan that was neither poison nor medicine...

If there was a doctor who prescribed—or rather, sold—such a thing, it would undoubtedly be a crime. Whether it could be prosecuted as murder is debatable, but it would certainly violate pharmaceutical laws.

"Hmm. I’ve heard that there were those among the ninjas who acted as doctors… but if the dancers weren’t suffering from malnutrition, what reason would they have to take Hyoro-Gan?"

Officer Casteiz thought that this was an unusually uncharacteristic question for a clever detective—a question so naive it could be called foolish.

She hadn’t known about the nature of Hyoro-Gan until today, but practically speaking, if such a complete nutritional food really existed, it would contribute more to the development of the beauty industry than to solving hunger issues.

In other words.

As a diet product.

"It’s precisely because we live in such a time of excess that emergency food like this could become widespread. Especially for dancers, even minor ones, who prioritize their appearance on stage. They'd pay a fortune for such a miracle drug."

Though she spoke passionately without thinking, even Officer Casteiz, who wasn’t a dancer, couldn’t deny having ever wished for such a thing, especially in her youth. Surely Ms. Kyoko, always fashionably dressed, could relate to this sentiment, regardless of cultural boundaries.

Even though, as an illegal immigrant, she had already crossed her fair share of boundaries.

"I’ve never gone on a diet, so I don’t really understand that feeling," the white-haired woman said, uttering a line that could incite extreme resentment from both Japan and the US, though it was unclear whether she had no memory of it or had truly never done it.

"But not understanding something isn’t good," said the Forgetful Detective as she suddenly stood up.

"Well then, to empathize, I, too, shall stand. On the Broadway stage."

3

"In Japanese, we use the onomatopoeia 'hyoro' to describe something thin. It's rather ironic, don't you think, that 'HYORO-GAN,' spelled in the Roman alphabet, might be used as a diet product?"

One could argue that even the Japanese word for irony itself ("hiniku", as in "skin and bone") would become ironic when talking about dieting, but the Forgetful Detective spoke these words as if delivering an ominous prelude, right there on the Broadway stage—as expected of a master detective, she delivered her lines with the dramatic flair of a seasoned performer. She might even burst into song.

That being said, this wasn’t a lecture or, rather, a performance—the three of them had come here in a patrol car to the theater where Randyl Rascuette had died, but today was a day off. Not an unscheduled holiday due to a death, but a regular day off—the show must go on.

Normally, this would be the time for a matinee performance, but right now the hall was completely empty—originally, even if Ms. Kyoko hadn’t suggested it, this was the only timing available for a second investigation of the scene.

It would be disgraceful if the police officers conducting the investigation were seen working with an unidentified detective, so Officer Casteiz, acting on her own discretion, arranged for the area to be cleared of people... As a result, the theater was now reserved for the three of them.

Even considering that, it was a bold, even audacious move… Normally, even if it was for the sake of an investigation, one would hesitate to stand on a Broadway stage.

In Japan, it might be like stepping onto a sacred ‘DOHYO,’ a sumo wrestling ring.

Of course, Officer Casteiz, who had once frequented this place, and even Officer Rivaldi, who wasn’t familiar with it, were looking up at Ms. Kyoko from the audience's side.

Though she wasn’t in a stage costume, the white-haired detective was wearing a windbreaker with ‘NYPD’ written in big letters for her outing from the rundown apartment—the same one she had worn during the investigation in Central Park. The policewoman had assumed Ms. Kyoko had a policy of never wearing the same clothes twice, but it seemed ‘uniforms’ were an exception.

As expected from the country of sailor suits and school uniforms.

Even so, that windbreaker seemed to be in heavy rotation, and the greeting of ‘My beloved NYPD,’ which she said every time they met, didn’t seem to be just flattery—imagine a detective who showed more respect for the NYPD than for Broadway.

"Oh no, I do like Broadway. Perhaps I go there almost every night. I just forget."

It wasn't entirely impossible, but it was unlikely that Ms. Kyoko was a regular on Broadway, like Officer Casteiz had been when she was new to this city—not with the thoroughness of the current investigation.

If a suspicious white-haired Japanese woman were frequenting the area nightly, there was no way that information wouldn’t have come from someone in the know—in fact, that was exactly how Kyoko Okitegami had come under investigation during the murder case in Central Park.

Well, it might have happened once or twice, but given Ms. Kyoko’s forgetful nature, it was hard to imagine that a routine action like that would only occur once or twice.

"You see right through me, Assistant Officer Casteiz. To confess, though I admire it, my understanding of Broadway is shallow. I might know even less than the average tourist."

It was unsettling how casually she admitted such a weakness on stage.

Should they shine a spotlight on her, like an interrogation lamp?

"There must be theaters in Japan similar to Broadway. I never had the chance, but when I was stationed in Okinawa, I had a fellow soldier who went to Tokyo to see it. Was it Noh or Kabuki—?"

"Indeed. As you say, both Noh and Kabuki have qualities similar to musicals. Especially, the traditional Japanese puppet theater Ningyo Joruri has something in common with ‘The Lion King,’ which continues to be a long-running hit on Broadway."

Really? It was supposed to be Officer Casteiz’ specialty to casually brush off the troublesome superior’s words. She appreciated Teach Kyoko’s kindness, but she wished the detective would correct him when he was wrong.

Ms. Kyoko continued.

Without stopping her steps on the stage—was that Noh footwork?

"However, as far as I know, which is as a Japanese cultural advisor, I’ve never heard of Hyoro-Gan being used in Noh, Kabuki, or Ningyo Joruri. In reality, is dieting such an important standard for Broadway actors?"

"Of course. It’s a job in front of people."

"But I don’t think they’re required to be as slim as ballet dancers. Since I have no memory, I can’t be sure, but I have the impression that there’s a lot of diversity in the body types of musical actors."

When she said "diversity," Officer Rivaldi had nothing to say—though Officer Casteiz didn’t think Ms. Kyoko used the word intentionally, it was an important keyword in New York. More important than dieting—assuming that because they were Broadway actors, they all must be on a rigorous diet was, in itself, a prejudice.

Some might need a sturdy build to sing loudly—this was even more so in opera.

However, that didn’t mean that no one was concerned about their physique or weight… Particularly for actors like Randyl Rascuette and the other three, who were still on the rise, self-management must have been a high priority.

The basis for Officer Rivaldi’s idea about the aesthetic sense of stage performers might have been somewhat simplistic, as one might expect from an outsider, but as an investigative direction, it wasn’t wrong.

"Yes, that’s right. I didn’t mean to nitpick. It’s just that I’d rather indulge than be miserly. However, if Hyoro-Gan is being circulated as a diet food, then having only four victims at this point seems somewhat too few."

"Are you saying it would be better if there were more victims?"

Officer Rivaldi's words seemed to chide the detective for her indiscretion, driven by curiosity. But behind those words was not just his unique sense of ethics, but also a reflection of his fear that such a thing might indeed come to pass.

Fortunately, so far, there had been no reports from their colleagues, who were continuing the interviews, about the discovery of additional victims… but it seemed the detective didn't simply see that as "fortunate."

"It's just that it feels strange that there aren't more victims when there should be. It's not like we're dealing with ninjas. And since I've already come up with two hypotheses that could resolve this discrepancy, I wanted to share them with you both, if you don't mind."

Whether it was because she was standing on the stage or because it was her standard style as a master detective, her speech was more theatrical than usual. But if she said she had hypotheses, they were worth hearing.

To think she had multiple explanations for why the damage caused by 'HYORO-GAN' hadn't spread as much as expected… come to think of it, the policewoman recalled the FBI agent referring to the Forgetful Detective's style as 'exhaustive reasoning.'

"Just to confirm, Officer Rivaldi. Your investigative direction is that a dubious diet food called Hyoro-Gan, whose efficacy is uncertain, was distributed to an unspecified large number of dancers on Broadway, who dream of a future in the industry. As a result, these victims were unable to consume the nutrients necessary for life, leading to the loss of young lives. Is that correct?"

"There's something I'd like to add, but yes, that's roughly the idea."

It was rare for Officer Rivaldi, a staunch advocate of free speech, to hold back from saying something—this showed just how much he wanted this case solved.

What he would have ordinarily added was his suspicion that the assassination unit 'SHINOBI' was lurking in the shadows of this case, but it seemed Ms. Kyoko deliberately chose to censor that part.

"If there is a reason why the number of victims has not increased from four, it seems appropriate to consider that these four were not part of an unspecified large group, but were targeted individuals."

Ms. Kyoko stopped on the stage, turning to face them with a dramatic flourish—it was visually striking, but a bit too sharp, not quite like the movements of a musical.

And she said something that couldn't be ignored.

Not part of an unspecified large group, but targeted individuals?

"Are you saying that the perpetrator didn't just carelessly sell a dubious secret medicine indiscriminately, resulting in the accidental deaths of those who bought it, but rather, from the beginning, intended to kill the four people, starting with Randyl Rascuette—no, ending with those four, by making them take Hyoro-Gan?"

The word "indiscriminate" wasn't one Officer Casteiz wanted to carelessly use in front of Officer Rivaldi, but it slipped out. Ms. Kyoko then made a minor adjustment, saying, "I can't guarantee that this is the end of it," and declared this definitively,

"If that's the case, then it explains why no other victims have been found."

Not a coincidental murder, but an intentional one…

The officer couldn't help but feel that, although the Forgetful Detective likely didn't mean to, she was pointing out a blunder in their investigation—they had recognized it as a murder case, but they hadn't thought of it in that way at all.

Selling diet food with the intention of killing from the start… that would make it not a "beauty industry," but a bona fide assassination unit.

"No, Kyoko-san. There's a flaw in that hypothesis. If the four were deliberately selected as limited victims, then there would need to be another missing link that connects them, aside from the word 'HYORO-GAN.' There must be a common factor that made them targets."

In response to the sharp observation from the skilled detective, who was second to none in picking up on the nuances of words, the master detective remained unfazed and, as if according to plan, moved on with her speech, saying, "Which brings us to my second hypothesis."

"The second hypothesis begins by refuting my earlier advice that Hyoro-Gan is not as effective as the rumors suggest, and is half-legend."

"Huh?"

She was retracting her own statement so easily?

It was such a seamless transition that Officer Casteiz felt as though she had simply missed it, like she might have dozed off in the patrol car on the way there—it was a policy shift that could only be made by a private detective, not bound by organizational constraints.

"Let's assume, hypothetically, that 'HYORO-GAN' is as effective as rumored. Japan has a candy that supposedly lets you run 300 meters with just one piece, but let's suppose Hyoro-Gan is

packed with enough nutrition that one piece could let you cross Japan, and ten could let you cross America—what would happen then?"

What would happen…? If such a miraculous health food existed, as they had said many times, it would solve hunger issues, and the diet industry would collapse.

Of course, it wouldn't be that simple in reality. Before solving hunger issues, the technology would likely be monopolized by developed countries, and if it were positioned as a luxury product, the diet industry might actually flourish.

Luxury product… huh?

"If it's effective, wouldn't it sell better than if it weren't? It should be a sensation."

While Officer Casteiz was internally pondering the idea of a "luxury product," Officer Rivaldi gave a more straightforward opinion.

"Wouldn't it be plausible for a thousand people within Broadway to be taking it?"

"Including trainees aspiring to be on stage, I suppose that number isn't outlandish. Even more wouldn't be surprising. But in reality, so far, there have only been four…"

"What if those four were exceptions?"

Ms. Kyoko raised four fingers and stated her conclusion.

"Four out of a thousand. In other words, if Hyoro-Gan didn't suit those four's bodies, and they died from allergies, side effects, or perhaps an overdose, then that number would be an extremely realistic figure."

So, contrary to the first hypothesis, there was no intention to kill, and from the perpetrator's perspective, it was merely an unfortunate accident that could occur statistically… is that what she was saying?

"In short, the reasoning is that because dying from Hyoro-Gan is rare, no matter how much we continue our interviews, we're unlikely to find many such unusual deaths."

The word "unusual death" could potentially trigger a strong reaction from Officer Rivaldi, but now was not the time for that—faced with an emergency, he let the problematic remark slide. With his hand on his chin, the skilled detective appeared to be pondering over Ms. Kyoko's second hypothesis.

"No, but even so. Even if that's the case, Kyoko-san. If it's become such a trend, then as we continue our interviews, we should be hearing from plenty of Hyoro-Gan users. Even if they haven't become malnourished or fallen ill, if they're taking it regularly as an effective diet food..."

"Whether it's effective or not, if they're taking an unapproved drug, they're not going to readily admit it to the NYPD. Having actors as testimonials saying, 'This made me healthy' or 'This gave me my ideal body,' would only make this Eastern medicine seem even more suspicious."

Coming from an Easterner herself, there was nothing more to be said.

However, if there were stage people who had taken Hyoro-Gan like a supplement and achieved health or their ideal body, then regardless of legality, they likely wouldn't testify—precisely because it worked, they would be even less likely to say anything unnecessary.

After all, initially, the NYPD began its inquiries under the assumption that it was a mysterious poison that would cause malnutrition and death if ingested—such a bad reputation would make it difficult to obtain the secret medicine, which would be a disaster.

It wasn't that the lack of efficacy kept it under wraps, but rather its effectiveness that made secrecy paramount—or perhaps people were simply wary of the consequences if word got out.

It would certainly be problematic if it ended up in the newspapers.

If the number of Hyoro-Gan pills was limited, those who currently used them would naturally want to keep their supply route a secret—they wouldn't want them monopolized by developed countries.

The very reason it remained a secret medicine—

"…In practical terms, the first hypothesis is probably more credible, but my officer's intuition is drawn to the second one."

After some deliberation, Officer Rivaldi said this—being able to say "officer's intuition" with a straight face, despite his progressive demeanor, showed that he was still an old hand.

All things considered, it was probably also because he had a certain fondness for Japan—he couldn't completely dismiss the fantasy that Hyoro-Gan might be effective, given his past as a soldier who once carried out missions in that country.

Hyoro-Gan was a type of military ration.

It wasn't uncommon for military technology to spread widely for other purposes—but still.

"But, Officer Rivaldi, if we go with the second hypothesis, our Homicide division is off the case."

Using the term "off the case" in a theater was a bit theatrical in itself, but as the Forgetful Detective's handler, Officer Casteiz couldn't help but voice her concern.

Handler, or perhaps a glorified prompter.

"It doesn't mean we're back to square one, but it would be considered an accidental death with no foul play—"

"There's definitely foul play, and it can't be called an accident. Even if there was no intent to kill, if someone is distributing a supplement that could cause death for their own profit, that's a crime."

He condemned it as a murder case.

That was one way to look at it… Even though Officer Casteiz thought that was out of their jurisdiction, his superior wasn't saying that out of the usual territorial concerns, which made it all the more difficult.

"In mystery terms, it's what you'd call 'willful negligence.'"

From the stage, the detective, for some reason, happily said something off the mark—despite being a detective.

Perhaps realizing this herself, she cleared her throat with a deliberately exaggerated cough and said,

"I mentioned that four out of a thousand is a highly realistic number, but that doesn't mean it's a small number of deaths. No matter how effective it is, it wouldn't pass approval with those kinds of numbers. That's precisely why it can be called a secret medicine—"

Moreover, the four out of a thousand was just an estimate. In reality, it could be four out of a hundred, or four out of fifty. In the worst-case scenario, it could even be four out of four, and it wouldn't contradict her point.

"Or perhaps the perpetrator is conducting clinical trials of Hyoro-Gan on Broadway. After all, there's no shortage of dreamers here."

A crime of that scale would undoubtedly fall outside the Homicide division's purview, but it wasn't Officer Casteiz' place to point that out—besides, Ms. Kyoko hadn't definitively declared the second hypothesis as fact.

There was still a possibility that the first hypothesis, which suggested the four were targeted, was correct, or even that their current investigative approach (assumption?) was valid… The

crucial point was that regardless of which was true, or even if none of them were, their course of action remained unchanged.

Steady interviews with people in the vicinity and related parties—no matter how stalled things got or how little progress was made, in the end, there was no other way. Whether the product was genuine or fake, there was no doubt that someone had sold Hyoro-Gan to the victims.

Someone—perhaps a ninja.

"If a stage performer who knew about ‘HYORO-GAN’ but refused to take it comes forward as a witness, that would solve this quickly. And if we could seize a physical sample of ‘HYORO-GAN,’ that would be ideal."

Indeed, that was the ideal scenario.

The ‘HYORO-GAN’ found in the victims’ stomachs, or potentially in their remains, would already be digested and absorbed, making it hard to argue it was in its original composition.

They wanted a complete piece of evidence, before it was consumed.

"When it comes to interviews, as a small, privately-run business without organizational power, I’m afraid I’m of little help,"

Ms. Kyoko said regretfully, but somehow it felt like she was cleverly shifting the tedious parts of the job onto them.

Perhaps sensing Officer Casteiz' thoughts with her detective intuition, she added, "So, allow me to offer a piece of advice, an outsider's perspective, if you will."

An 'outsider’s perspective'—the way she had worded it, wasn’t that a term from the game 'Go'?

"It’s a guideline for conducting interviews that could also support the first hypothesis—so far, it’s been reported that no commonalities have been found among the four known victims, but have you looked into whether they share any mutual acquaintances or friends?"

"No, if they did, that would be the common link."

Officer Rivaldi replied as if stating the obvious—and while he wasn't wrong, it seemed the Forgetful Detective was merely setting the stage, for she continued,

"Then how about mutual acquaintances of their acquaintances?"

Mutual—acquaintances of acquaintances?

"You could call them friends of friends."

"…Are you talking about the kind of imaginary figures discussed in folklore, as in rumors you hear about a friend's friend?"

"In Japan, we call them urban legends, but acquaintances of acquaintances and friends of friends are not imaginary. They're definitely more real than ninjas."

Well, she wasn't wrong.

Your boss's boss is real, and so is your subordinate's subordinate.

"On the subject of urban legends, there's that saying that you're only six degrees of separation away from any person in the world, be it a historical figure or a celebrity. So, if you trace the acquaintances of acquaintances, you might not be able to cover the whole world, but you could certainly cover all of Broadway."

Instead of looking for a mutual acquaintance, search for mutual acquaintances of acquaintances—it was an unconventional approach, but still, it might be surprisingly logical for tracing the origins of 'HYORO-GAN,' which itself seemed like something out of an urban legend.

An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a legend for a legend.

Come to think of it, a superfood that allowed you to survive on a single pill every ten days sounded exactly like the kind of supplement that would be recommended by a friend of a friend.

Urban legends... yet another quintessential New York element.

"If there's a mutual acquaintance of the four victims' acquaintances,"

Officer Rivaldi asked Ms. Kyoko, as if to confirm.

"Can we consider that person the one who distributed Hyoro-Gan to the residents of the theater district?"

"That seems highly likely."

'As if scattering caltrops.'

With that, and the introduction of yet another ninja term, Ms. Kyoko stepped down from the Broadway stage.

Not only was it worth visiting the Okitegami Detective Agency's New York branch, deviating from the official procedures of the NYPD, for the live information they had gained on Japanese culture, but they had also been given a new axis to guide the ongoing murder investigation. However, in retrospect, Officer Casteiz couldn't help but feel like they had been conveniently used to give a proper sightseeing tour to an illegal immigrant from Japan.

If the idea was to cast two officers in the role of Broadway tour guides, then she had to say she was impressed by the sheer audacity of it. But she couldn't shake the feeling that the Forgetful Detective could have given them that new axis just as well while sitting comfortably on her office sofa, rather than standing so conspicuously on stage.

Why couldn't she be a normal, armchair detective?

In the first place, as was the case with the kusarigama last time and the shuriken the time before that, the Forgetful Detective had a habit of leaving them hanging. It came with the territory of her daily memory reset, but it was still frustrating.

It was up to Officer Casteiz and company to verify those baseless hypotheses based on circumstantial evidence, and that wasn't a task that could be completed in a day or two… She wasn't saying that Officer Rivaldi was the ideal boss, but the Forgetful Detective would undoubtedly be the worst boss.

Even taking that into account, didn't Ms. Kyoko feel curious about the truth or want to confirm if her deductions were correct? Or had she already completely come to terms with it—after all, she couldn't possibly be fully trusting and leaving everything to Officer Casteiz and Officer Rivaldi, whom she'd only just met.

Officer Casteiz was feeling somewhat resentful and lashing out at Ms. Kyoko's hands-off approach like that because, despite taking the lead in continuing interviews on Broadway for several days now, the true nature of "HYORO-GAN" still hadn't been revealed.

Progress had been slow, agonizingly so.

The pointless interviews had even sparked a ridiculous rumor that there was an illegal handgun circulating under that name—of course, it wasn't a 'GUN' at all.

It's as if the information on the ground was being deliberately confused by a covert assassination unit from the Warring States period, said to have also engaged in espionage—the 'SHINOBI.' Despite Ms. Kyoko's suggested approach of searching for "acquaintances of acquaintances," none had been found—practically none at all.

Was this theory conceived on the stage nothing more than an empty theory?

Among the four victims, there were "acquaintances of acquaintances" for two, maybe three of them, though the connections were tenuous at best—like Broadway enthusiasts who had once watched productions at the theaters where the victims performed, much like Officer Casteiz herself. However, no "acquaintance of acquaintances" has been found that connected all four victims.

At this rate, even the urban legend that everyone in the world was connected by just six degrees of separation seemed dubious at best. Maybe it was just a hypothesis that some people had an unusually large number of acquaintances…

It felt like they had been dragged along into one of Ms. Kyoko's wild goose chases, a pattern of her exhaustive reasoning… If that was the case, the officer could only say, "Here we go again." By the third joint investigation, Officer Casteiz was no longer fazed by such setbacks, but as the FBI agent once remarked, the flaw of exhaustive reasoning was that when it missed, it missed spectacularly. Officer Rivaldi, ever the optimist, would likely rephrase that as a quirk rather than a flaw, but still, it felt like Ms. Kyoko herself had thrown them off the trail.

Could she actually be a ninja?

A "KUNOICHI"?

That said, the lack of progress after nearly a week of interviews since the case had came to light also meant that no new victims had been discovered—there had been no more deaths of performers from malnutrition since those initial four. No past victims had been found, and no new victims had appeared.

Because of that, both today's matinees and evening shows were proceeding smoothly—the show must go on. At this point, it was tempting to think that maybe the death of Randyl Rascuette wasn't a crime after all.

Maybe the "HYORO-GAN" mentioned in the memo didn't mean anything significant… perhaps it wasn't even the name of a supplement, just some incoherent scribbling written in the middle of the night… Such pessimistic thoughts came to mind because even the autopsy results of the other three victims, dug up from their graves, were inconclusive.

No substance resembling a secret medicine was detected in the bodies of the three victims—though that didn't necessarily mean they hadn't taken "HYORO-GAN," the already tenuous connection had now grown even weaker.

Officer Casteiz couldn't help but feel a pang of guilt for the desecration they had inflicted upon the deceased and the anguish it must have caused their families. It was as if their pursuit of a missing link had only served to widen the gap—and now, even the keyword "HYORO-GAN" found in each of the victims' belongings, just like in Randyl Rascuette's memo, didn't seem to hold much weight.

Perhaps the four victims were just ninja enthusiasts with a fascination for Asian culture—a niche missing link. Niche or not, as Ms. Kyoko had mentioned, it was still a somewhat obscure ninja tool, but in this day and age, it wasn't obscure enough to be absent from even the vast databases of AI chatbots.

What had once been known only to a few was now common knowledge to all.

Be that as it may, as a member of law enforcement, Officer Casteiz couldn't rely solely on the hypotheses of a private investigator, no matter how intriguing they might be—she had a reputation to uphold, an image to maintain as a member of the NYPD, admired even by foreign detectives. If the policewoman didn't approach things with her own perspective, instead of just following her superior's investigative policies, she might find her job taken over by an AI chatbot's algorithm.

Though she had been persistently submitting transfer requests, eager to escape the shadow of her overachieving superior, she had no intention of retiring.

After all, she had a life to live.

Even if it was a wild goose chase, she couldn't bring herself to completely dismiss the innovative approach Ms. Kyoko had presented with her "acquaintances of acquaintances" theory—changing perspectives like that was sometimes crucial in investigations.

Therefore, Officer Casteiz decided to investigate the financial situation of the four victims as her own approach.

Luxury product.

Focusing on the keyword that had caught her attention that day.

Regardless of its authenticity, if the superfood "HYORO-GAN" was indeed circulating, this Oriental secret medicine surely wouldn't be cheap. If one pill provided ten days' worth of nutrients, it would easily cost more than ten days' worth of food, even at the lowest estimate.

Whether one considered such an expense frivolous or not was beside the point. Such extravagant spending would inevitably leave a trail, a pattern too conspicuous to ignore—essentially, if the four victims' bank accounts and card histories showed a consistent expenditure of the same amount, it could be seen as evidence that they were purchasing "HYORO-GAN."

If such data were found, it would constitute undeniable circumstantial evidence and could provide the missing link they had been searching for—then, without having to continue the

tedious interviews, they could randomly investigate the financial situations of other dancers still performing on Broadway and likely find others making similar expenditures.

A sampling survey of sorts.

Their target: individuals who, despite using 'HYORO-GAN,' remained alive and presumably healthy. The ideal witnesses, at least from the NYPD's perspective. Whether they'd be willing to testify was another matter, and Officer Rivaldi would likely not agree with an investigative method consisting of randomly sampling financial situations, so this would have to be done discreetly.

She'd have to report the results after she got them.

In that sense, Officer Casteiz was treading on thin ice, but unfortunately, it was hard to say the results were worth the risk—after accessing the bank accounts of the four victims, no suspicious expenditures were found.

From none of the accounts—not even Randyl Rascuette's, who was definitely taking "HYORO-GAN"—was there any sign that large sums had been withdrawn to purchase this Oriental secret medicine.

All four had somewhat extravagant spending habits for back-up dancers at the bottom of the ladder, but Officer Casteiz wasn't looking to question the victims' character, and it wasn't something that could be considered a common link… Their spending habits and where they spent their money were clear, and they were all different.

If they bought "HYORO-GAN" in a way that left no records—through cash, for example, or using a lesser-known form of electronic money—it would only highlight the illegality of the transaction, but there was no evidence of that, either.

Though it wasn't as big a miss as Ms. Kyoko's, it seemed Officer Casteiz' deduction was also off the mark—if there was any consolation, it was that the investigation hit a dead end before she could delve into the financial records of individuals beyond the initial four victims.

Since the investigation had stalled after merely checking the victims' financial situations, it would be easier to report to her superior who was a human rights advocate and disliked surveillance societies—it was still a failure, but surprisingly, the same boss who excelled at catching people's slips of the tongue and taking advantage of their words was kind when it came to his subordinates' failures.

Perhaps it was a coping mechanism, a way to counteract his distaste for the detective's misses—by being kind to his subordinates, he seemed to be alleviating the stress he got from the detective. Needless to say, the combination of the fastest detective and the most cautious inspector wasn't exactly ideal.

In any case, when Officer Casteiz reported that checking the financial situations of the four victims had been meaningless, hanging her head low, there came an unexpected response from her superior,

"Did you only investigate their expenditures?"

"Only their expenditures? Well, of course, it was only expenditures… I was trying to trace the purchase history of 'HYORO-GAN,' so naturally, that's what I focused on." It was a report that Officer Casteiz had confidently made, thinking she wouldn't get scolded, so she was flustered when her superior took issue with it from an unexpected angle.

"Should I have investigated their income as well? But…"

"The four of them were big spenders, weren't they? Could they have afforded such extravagance on just what they earned during their early careers?"

"Now that you mention it, that's true, but…"

However, even if it was their early careers, the times were different from those of Officer Rivaldi, who had worked his way up from the field and still clung to it.

These were modern times.

Especially in the entertainment world, things advanced rapidly. Even a bit-part dancer on Broadway might be making a lot of money through video streaming—they could also receive direct support from hardcore fans, and not all actors survived on part-time jobs. Besides, even though they were bit-part actors, they were still on Broadway—they must have had some potential and charisma that would make people want to support them passionately.

Well, since she couldn't blatantly treat her boss like a fossil, Officer Casteiz had no choice but to remain silent…

"Do you remember what the Forgetful Detective said?"

And as she stayed silent, Officer Rivaldi pressed her further.

"She's probably forgotten herself by now, but if my memory serves me right, she said, 'perhaps the perpetrator is conducting clinical trials of Hyoro-Gan on Broadway.' If it was a clinical trial, couldn't it be that the victims were not paying money, but rather receiving it?"

"Oh."

That was a blind spot.

Not only was it a blind spot, it hit the nail on the head.

It wasn't exactly in line with the modern gig economy, but rather an old-fashioned "part-time job." But now that she thought about it, back in college, quite a few of her friends had paid their tuition that way—she felt a faint, dark pang of guilt, remembering how she used to frequent Broadway shows while her friends were struggling to make ends meet, a feeling she had completely forgotten.

Of course, clinical trials…

If the victims' somewhat reckless spending was backed by money they received for cooperating in the development of "HYORO-GAN," then naturally, Officer Casteiz should have conducted a thorough investigation into their income as well. Even if she was reprimanded for skipping steps, she would have to accept it.

In her defense, the idea of a legendary Eastern elixir, a superfood promising the perfect physique, being offered not as a free sample or a volunteer opportunity, but as a paid gig, was simply beyond her comprehension. She had, after all, been dieting like any other person since her teens.

If she didn’t take pride in being a member of the NYPD, she might have been tempted to give in to such a dangerous offer. The very existence of such a scheme only served to highlight the insidious nature of the crime.

Of course, just because things were accelerating, she couldn’t rush to conclusions—this time, she had to follow the procedures properly and carefully reexamine the financial situations of the four victims.

In addition to the income that had been pointed out, she needed to thoroughly investigate the expenditures as well… Even if the clinical trial payments weren’t made through bank transfers, she might be able to infer the amount of money they received from the dates of their reckless spending. If their extravagant spending was the result of money they earned quickly…

Regarding this, she had a clear sense of something before even starting the investigation. While she was well aware, to the point of being sick of it, that having preconceptions wasn’t a good thing—something her boss drilled into her—she still felt lighter knowing that she was approaching the investigation with the confidence that it would yield some results.

Even if it wasn’t counted as a commonality under Officer Rivaldi’s command, the reason why the identified victims so far were concentrated among bit-part dancers, and why the fact that top stars were not avid users of "HYORO-GAN" hadn’t come to light, would make perfect sense if this part-time job was the reason. Although she wasn’t familiar with Broadway salaries, it only

made sense that lead actors wouldn't risk their lucrative careers for a shady side hustle, no matter how enticing.

If someone was taking advantage of this psychology to spread "HYORO-GAN," then they needed to arrest the culprit as soon as possible, or the number of victims would only increase… There was no guarantee that the clinical trial would remain confined to Broadway forever.

If it spread from Manhattan Island to New York State and then across the entire country, it would be out of control—that would be a federal crime, and the FBI would have to step in.

An Eastern elixir transforming into a Western epidemic.

With a premature sense of certainty and an inexplicable sense of crisis, Officer Casteiz began reexamining the victims' financial situations—without rushing to conclusions. But, if she had to give one, she did indeed find results.

However, the results were slightly different from what she had expected—frankly, the analysis left her feeling unsatisfied.

Let me explain.

Officer Rivaldi’s officer intuition, in which he took great pride, were correct, and there were strange money flows in the victims' accounts that were different from the regular salaries they received as dancers—although the money wasn’t directly deposited into their bank accounts, it was in the form of electronic money that was difficult to trace and highly anonymous. This was the commonality that finally emerged among the victims.

The timing of the deposits was also, almost as if planned, every ten days, which fit perfectly with both the nature of "HYORO-GAN" as described by the advisor and the theory that these payments were clinical trial rewards.

However, the amount of money deposited was not consistent.

It varied between the four victims, and even for a single "test subject," the amount varied each time. The second reward was less than the first, and the third reward was higher than the first—this made the data unreliable.

There was no discernible pattern.

Officer Casteiz had never participated in such part-time work herself, nor had she heard detailed stories from friends in college, so she wasn’t familiar with the specifics of how clinical trials were conducted, but she could at least surmise that if the reward amount wasn’t consistent, accurate results couldn’t be expected.

If the reward amount changed based on the trial results, then the test subjects would be all too willing to provide whatever convenient data was desired—with or without the desired results, the cooperation fee should always be consistent as part of a fair transaction.

Well, maybe she was just being overly picky about an unfair deal that was taking place in the underworld of Broadway (if so, it was probably due to the influence of her superior, who didn't acknowledge the existence of such an "underworld"), but even if the varying amounts were intended to gather only convenient data, the differences in reward amounts seemed too small.

It wasn't miserly, but it was somewhat reserved.

For something that was supposed to be a sweet deal, the reward was surprisingly modest… as mild as the seasoning in Japanese cuisine.

How should she interpret this mystery?

Was it simply because it was rooted in Japanese culture?

However, this might have been one of those things that was better left unexplained—at any rate, the suspicious money flow had been revealed (or should it be called a "backflow"?), so she should have just reported it promptly to Officer Rivaldi.

Unfortunately, Officer Casteiz wasn't just a police officer in a mystery novel who existed solely to make a detective look good; she was a member of the NYPD, admired even by detectives, so she almost instinctively solved the mystery of the discrepancy.

She could only say that it was against her will.

The hint was that the amounts weren't just inconsistent—the figures were oddly irregular. At first, she thought the sequence of numbers might be some kind of code or message, but that wasn't the case.

The truth was more straightforward.

However, as an officer in charge of this investigation, she probably shouldn't say this, but it was a mystery she really didn't want to solve—she wished someone else had solved it instead.

But since she had inadvertently solved it, she had the responsibility to report it—without embellishment, without any additional flavor, she had no choice but to report it to her superior.

"Are you sure?"

Officer Rivaldi made an even more displeased face than she had anticipated—an overt expression of dissatisfaction that he hadn't shown at all when she reported earlier that there had been no results.

"Yes. There's no mistake. Since it involved some detailed calculations, I asked another person to double-check it just to be sure, but the result was the same."

"So, that means…"

With a bitter expression still on his face, the difficult superior made a difficult decision—that was the job of a commander.

"We have no choice but to pay another visit. To the Forgetful Detective's office."

5

"Nice to meet you. I'm Kyoko Okitegami, a detective."

The Forgetful Detective greeted them with "Nice to meet you" as casually as one might say "Hello," but when you think about it, the Japanese word "Konnichiwa," which means "Hello" in English, is written like "Today" in kanji. So for Ms. Kyoko, "Nice to meet you" might literally be a self-introduction as well as a greeting.

In any case, this was the second visit to the Okitegami Detective Agency's New York branch for the Broadway case—this time, it seemed like it would take a while, and unlike the first visit, there was no urgency, so Officer Rivaldi seemed to have decided to indulge in a cup of coffee.

The lack of urgency wasn't necessarily something to be relieved about, but it was because, for the time being, the feared situation where more victims might appear hadn't happened yet. The reason it would take a while wasn't just because Ms. Kyoko had forgotten the first meeting and they would have to explain the case from the beginning again—it was also because there was something they needed to confirm strongly with this "first meeting" involving the illegal immigrant from Japan.

Depending on the circumstances, they might even have to take this Japanese cultural advisor to the Homicide Department's interrogation room due to the serious nature of the situation.

Officer Casteiz wasn't particularly thrilled about the prospect of taking into custody someone with whom she had developed a long-standing relationship, but the person in question was completely at ease, cheerfully brewing coffee for her sudden visitors.

It was rare to find an illegal immigrant who was this friendly toward the NYPD—even without such a serious situation, they could take her into custody at any time.

While waiting for the coffee, Officer Casteiz habitually glanced at the wall newspaper—new issues had been pasted up over the past few days, but there were no new headlines related to the mysterious Broadway deaths.

Perhaps, in the eyes of the public, this was already treated as a "solved case"—no matter how much the stage was Broadway, if the victims were bit-part dancers, it wouldn't generate as much sensational interest as the Statue of Liberty case.

If you didn't keep providing topics, the public would forget. That was the fate of entertainment. However, in terms of societal danger, this "HYORO-GAN" case could potentially cause far more chaos than "KUSARIGAMA"… If the clinical trials of this Oriental secret medicine concluded and it spread among the citizens, it would be out of control.

If they were going to stop it, it had to be now.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. So, what business do two NYPD officers, whom I admire so much, have with me today? I can solve any case in a day."

She smiled brightly as she made her sales pitch as usual, and Officer Casteiz exchanged a glance with her superior, thinking it would be best to follow that lead.

Receiving a silent nod from Officer Rivaldi, she said,

"Yes, actually, we have something we'd like to consult you about."

It wasn't a lie that it was a serious matter.

Whether it would remain a consultation or lead to her being put behind bars depended entirely on the Forgetful Detective's response, but for the time being, Officer Casteiz began explaining the case from the beginning, just as she had done the other day.

A backup dancer who collapsed during a performance. Malnutrition, starvation. A mysterious secret medicine found in the stomach. The note left behind with the word "HYORO-GAN." Three others who had died in a similar manner on Broadway, with no apparent connection—she recounted the details step by step, as if reviewing them.

"My, my, you sure know a lot about 'HYORO-GAN.' Even in Japan, most people don't know about this ninja tool. Some people even mistake it for poison… As expected of NYPD detectives, there's nothing you don't know, is there?"

When the very person who had told them all this praised them so earnestly, it made them feel awkward, so they could only respond, "We don't know everything, we just know what we know."

*TL Note: this line ("なんでもは知りませんよ、知っていることだけです") is *also* like Hanekawa's ("なんでもは知らないわよ。知ってることだけ"), only more polite

"Anyway, finding the missing link between the victims seems like the best way to prevent further casualties. If this secret medicine spreads under the guise of a health supplement and more people die, it would be a disaster."

"If it were me, I would check the financial transactions of the four victims. If this is a secret, large-scale clinical trial, then there must be an exchange of money, to some extent."

Wait a minute, what happened to the "friend of a friend" theory?

She had intended to keep her explanation neutral, but perhaps she had unconsciously biased it toward that theory as the originator of the idea—this detective was as sensitive as litmus paper, reading even into her psychology.

Well, she supposed it was good that the detective was quick on the uptake.

In fact, she thought, why not let the detective do the deduction at this point? It might be a good strategy—though it was a bit late to say this, Officer Casteiz wasn't sitting here with absolute confidence. She even hoped that there had been some mistake.

It was like a triple-check by a famous detective.

It was starting to feel like one of those Columbo-style investigations, where the suspect is led to reveal the secret through their own deductions.

"Please take a look at this document. It's the financial records of the victims."

"Is it okay for me to see this? Such private, personal information?"

Even when asked by the Forgetful Detective, who was strict about confidentiality, they could only silently hand over the smartphone screen—otherwise, it would have required a lot of cumbersome procedures.

"There's a lot of mixed materials here, so it might be a bit hard to read—"

"Don't worry about that. I'm quite good at managing money. Unfortunately, forgetting things is kind of my trademark, but I probably have a bookkeeping qualification."

As expected of someone running a private office in New York without a legal advisor or tax accountant—though the legality of her business was debatable.

Even though the concept of bookkeeping qualifications didn’t exist in the United States, Ms. Kyoko quickly swiped through the privacy of the four victims on the screen without pausing and said,

"I see, I see."

Nodding with a smile.

What did she mean by "I see"? And what was so funny?

"No, it’s just that I can’t help but smile when I see the flow of money."

What kind of personality was that?

Was she just someone who loved money?

However, it seemed that wasn't entirely the case.

"I understand why the two of you came to see me—you didn’t come to hire me as a detective; you came because you suspect me, didn’t you?"

When she suddenly hit the nail on the head like that, Officer Casteiz was caught off guard and flustered, but Officer Rivaldi, with his greater experience, took the reins.

"And why would you think that? Surely you don’t have anything in mind?"

But Ms. Kyoko remained unfazed.

"It’s obvious from the documents you showed me. In short, the mysterious discrepancy in the amounts of what seems to be the clinical trial cooperation payments, deposited at ten-day intervals for each of the four victims, caught your attention, didn’t it?"

It was a bit disheartening to have her so easily point out the results of Officer Casteiz’ painstaking work, but they could only hear her out.

"At the same time, even when looking at the amount of a single payment, it’s oddly precise and doesn’t seem to be a round number. At first, I thought it might be due to fees being deducted, but that doesn’t seem to be the case—however, the range of variation isn’t that large, so it doesn’t appear to be a success reward for gathering favorable data by deliberately altering the figures."

It felt as if she was tracing the officer's thoughts, but at an incredibly fast pace. It was hard to maintain dignity when hours of deduction were being processed in mere seconds—mentally, no less.

It could leave a lasting sense of regret.

"And so, if I were to conclude with my exhaustive deduction, the answer is simple. These amounts were converted based on exchange rates, weren't they?"

Without considering their feelings, Ms. Kyoko stated it plainly—no, she probably did consider them. After all, she had already seen through the reason why the two officers had come to this office.

"In other words, the amounts of money transferred seem inconsistent and fractional when viewed in dollars because they fluctuate for each person. However, if you consider the amount before conversion, it was likely a fixed amount, the same for everyone, every time."

After saying this, Ms. Kyoko glanced at the newspapers pasted on the wall—though what she was referring to wasn't written there.

"If there's a newspaper that lists exchange rates, verifying this would be easy, but there's probably no need. Since you came to see me, it's safe to assume that the amounts were consistent before conversion, and that the currency was in Japanese yen, right?"

Impressive.

Her bookkeeping qualification wasn't just for show. The policewoman didn't know exactly what kind of qualification that was, and the other probably didn't really have one—but still, if this wasn't a confession, that was?

"Roughly calculating in Japanese yen, it would likely be about fifty thousand yen per clinical trial. I've heard there was a time when one dollar was 360 yen because a circle has 360 degrees… but now it should be around a hundred yen per dollar. If they took 'HYORO-GAN' once every ten days, that's 150,000 yen a month. An additional income of about 1,500 dollars—not bad. It's like forex trading, except with your life on the line."

"…Should I take that as a confession?"

"Maybe you shouldn't. After all, there are plenty of Japanese people in this city, including tourists."

Despite Officer Rivaldi's piercing gaze, Ms. Kyoko remained unfazed—even though this was their "first meeting," she wasn't intimidated at all by his stern expression.

"There aren't many illegal immigrants from Japan without ID though. Should we continue this conversation in the interrogation room?"

"No, no, that won’t be necessary. I can't allow the NYPD, admired by all detectives, to make a false arrest—by heaven and earth, I swear I am innocent."

Ms. Kyoko brushed back her white hair, as if that were proof of her innocence, but swearing by heaven and earth wouldn’t help much when the Forgetful Detective lost her memory every night.

Her claim of innocence wasn’t exactly reliable.

"Besides, I’d advise against arresting someone just for being Japanese in this day and age—you could end up in the newspapers. There are generations of Japanese-Americans who have lived here as American citizens. Please don’t make me paste such headlines on my wall."

That was a weak spot, especially for the human-rights-conscious Officer Rivaldi. But since they had realized that the clinical trial payments were made in Japanese yen, they couldn’t help but lean the investigation in that direction, even if they tried to stay unbiased. After all, the two of them had rushed to the Okitegami Detective Agency’s New York branch to quickly handle this new finding before it could escalate into an international issue.

Especially when it came to this unidentified Japanese woman—though it wasn't a criminal record, she had been involved in incidents like the shuriken in Central Park and the kusarigama wrapped around the Statue of Liberty.

Even if they brought those up again, she had completely forgotten about them, remaining as calm as ever—but how likely was it that this Japanese woman was the mastermind who scattered 'HYORO-GAN' (like caltrops?) across Broadway?

They were desperate for any clue, and the fact that she quickly identified the missing link among the four victims based on minimal information was enough to deepen suspicion about her.

"Very well. It seems I have to get serious to clear my name—I do love a good challenge. Just to be clear, I’ll be getting paid for this job, right?"

The way she casually demanded a fee showed her strong business acumen… With a personality that seeked incentives, she was unlikely to participate in clinical trials herself. In a detective novel, this would be the part where the hero volunteered to investigate for free to clear their name, but she was clearly a woman who knew her worth.

Since they already paid her an advisory fee the last time they visited to ask about 'HYORO-GAN,' this felt like a case of double payment, but as this was a different matter, they couldn't wiggle their way out of it—they'd just have to consider it a handling fee. The FBI wouldn’t be offering any more assistance, so this could be considered an expense.

They were already getting the stink eye from the accounting department… this was, in its own way, another kind of clinical trial. A trial of the Forgetful Detective's deductive abilities… It might actually be them who were the litmus test.

"Thank you. Now then, Officer Rivaldi, Assistant Officer Casteiz, since you've finished your coffee, shall we switch riversides?"

"Switch riversides? Are we heading to the Hudson River?"

"Oh, no. That was a confusing Japanese expression. I meant, shall we change locations?"

So, did she want to go back to Broadway for another on-site investigation? They really wished she'd stop using the NYPD as her tour guide, and the last investigation didn't seem to yield much visible results—besides, today wasn't supposed to be a day off. At this time, they were probably in the middle of rehearsals for the evening performance.

"No, not an on-site investigation. After talking so much about health supplements, I've gotten hungry. There's a saying in Japan, 'You can't fight on an empty stomach'—how about we all go get something to eat together?"

6

The Forgetful Detective's memory reset every day, or more precisely, every time she slept—whether it was day or night, even after a nap or a siesta, she forgot everything. With the plausible excuse that a sudden bout of hypoglycemia from hunger could lead to an accidental nap and ruin their constructive conversation, Officer Rivaldi and Officer Casteiz found themselves being taken to one of New York's top steakhouses, not far from Broadway.

It was the kind of place where tourists would go to create a memory on their last night, the kind that required dressing up—yet Ms. Kyoko, wearing a dazzling outfit that made her look like a regular, strode in as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Where in that old, run-down apartment had she hidden such clothes? She was like a relic from the era when Japan was hailed as "Japan as Number One."

The two officers, who normally used their police badges to get into places in their everyday clothes, had to stop along the way to buy jackets and dresses that wouldn't break the atmosphere of the place, but this wouldn't just be a matter of getting a stern look from the finance department—they were looking at a hefty out-of-pocket expense.

The detectives paying out of their own pockets to satisfy the detective's hunger... this would be, in Japanese terms, a matter of 'seppuku.' The policewoman had heard that in Japanese police culture, there was a practice of feeding suspects 'KATSU-DON' during interrogations to build trust…

Moreover, despite her small frame, Ms. Kyoko ordered a considerable amount of meat, along with a large serving of sides—perhaps she subscribed to the theory that eating vegetables canceled out the calories in meat.

She was an unusually hearty eater, even by American standards, a stark contrast to the image of a dainty Japanese woman.

"No, no, you need to eat well or your brain won't work. Eating delicious food can't be bad for you."

She was saying something incredibly unwise for a master detective—her brain didn't seem to be working. Then again, the dry-aged steak at this restaurant was undeniably tempting.

Should they consider it a perk of the job that they got to partake in such a meal? The problem was that her proactive superior had no tolerance for the bad habit of 'superiors should gladly treat their subordinates to meals.'

It looked like they were in for the dreaded split-the-bill scenario.

Officer Casteiz had heard that Japan didn't have a tipping culture, but she could probably eat three meals just on the tip they'd have to leave after this dinner.

"I'm not joking. Is the 'Hyoro-Gan' in question tastier than steak?"

Even though Ms. Kyoko said she wasn't joking after devouring her meal, it wouldn't hide the fact that she had an astonishing, joke-like appetite that didn't even require a doggy bag. She brought this up as if she had planned all along to ask about this in the restaurant—of course, after ordering New York cheesecake for dessert.

"Tastier than steak…? What do you mean by that, Kyoko-san?"

Officer Rivaldi, who probably wasn't on a diet by coincidence, though perhaps age was a factor, had eaten less than half of what Ms. Kyoko had. But even so, he seemed to be suffering from some indigestion, responding in a heavier tone than usual.

She had said something about needing to eat properly for her brain to work, but wouldn't a full stomach, much like low blood sugar, make you sleepy and hinder logical thinking?

Officer Casteiz, who hadn't even ordered dessert, wondered about that, and ended up ordering one just because of the flow of the conversation. Appetite was a powerful thing.

No wonder the diet industry was booming.

Hmm… could that be what Kyoko was getting at?

"Yes. No matter how effective the circulating 'Hyoro-Gan' may be, if you think about whether it would work as a diet aid, it seems somewhat doubtful now that we're indulging in gourmet food like this, doesn't it?"

They said there was always room for dessert.

As she said this, Ms. Kyoko picked up a baguette from the basket, tore off a piece with gusto, and popped it into her mouth—the policewoman thought Ms. Kyoko had stopped the waiter from clearing it earlier because she was going to use the bread as some kind of metaphor, but she just ate it normally.

Could she not wait for dessert?

"There's a separate stomach for bread, too."

Of course there was.

"My point is, if 'Hyoro-Gan' and bread were placed side by side, most people would choose bread, wouldn't they?"

Team bread? A Japanese person, no less?

The officer had heard the other spoke French, but still...

"And it goes without saying that steak would be even more appealing. Even if there were a newly invented superfood that could cover ten days of nutrition in a single pill, could a person really live without eating anything else?"

"No way…"

The officer couldn't say for sure, but it did seem pretty difficult.

It would be like getting all your nutrition through an IV drip. She had never heard anyone say a gastric tube was convenient. Whether or not this was what Ms. Kyoko was aiming for, after indulging in such gourmet food, it certainly felt even less likely.

"Then… could it be that 'HYORO-GAN' is particularly delicious? More so than steak, or than dessert and bread which fill your separate stomachs? Could it be so good that, after eating it, you wouldn't want anything else?"

"Setting aside the actual 'HYORO-GAN' that ninjas supposedly carried, it's possible that the new 'HYORO-GAN' being distributed on Broadway is indeed delicious. It could be a highly refined

product, with superior flavoring that makes it the most satisfying food in existence—however, if that's the case, it leads to another problem."

If someone developed a food so delicious that it made all other foods taste bland, that would be dangerous in itself, and it would no longer be food but a drug, Officer Casteiz thought. But the "other problem" Ms. Kyoko mentioned arose precisely because it was food.

"Would it even be possible to limit yourself to just one 'HYORO-GAN' every ten days if it's that delicious? That would be stricter than any diet. Wouldn't people just end up eating it like Pongashi?"

" 'Pongashi'? What do you mean?"

Ms. Kyoko chuckled and said, "Sorry, that was unclear," before correcting herself.

"Like Konpeito."

Well, that didn't really clear things up… but the officer gathered it was some kind of traditional Japanese candy—small, tasty, and hard to stop eating. Junk food, as it was called in America… or "dagashi" in Japan, she believed.

"Sure, it would be impossible to complete a mission if you were expected to survive on just one donut-like 'sata andagi' for ten days, even if it had enough calories for that."

Officer Rivaldi seemed to recall his days in Okinawa as he said this, trying to match Ms. Kyoko's metaphor—though Officer Casteiz, who had a vague knowledge of such things, knew that a 'sata andagi' wasn't exactly what you'd call 'bite-sized.' Perhaps Officer Rivaldi also had a youthful experience where he couldn't stop eating them.

But while 'sata andagi' may indeed be like that, if people couldn't stop themselves from eating 'Hyoro-Gan,' that would be completely counterproductive.

If it was being tested as a diet or health food, and if one pill contained ten days' worth of nutrients, it would be an extremely high-calorie item.

Dessert and meat wouldn't even compare.

If someone consumed a large quantity of such a thing, instead of losing weight, they'd turn into a deliberate glutton—perhaps suited for the "De Niro's Method Acting," but completely contrary to the goal of dieting.

It wouldn't be an issue if the victims had died from overnutrition—well, it would be an issue, yet a different one—but it was clear that Randyl Rascuette and the others had died from malnutrition.

There was no twist there.

"Yes. It’s difficult to put into words, but if it’s delicious, that’s a problem."

Ms. Kyoko said.

If it was delicious, it was a problem—while that’s not exactly what was difficult to say, it was certainly a complex issue.

On the other hand, if the Hyoro-Gan truly embodied the saying "good medicine tastes bitter," people would be bound to succumb to the temptations of other delicious foods—the rebound effect from overindulging afterward was usually called a relapse, and that too was counterproductive to the goal.

This whole thing just didn't add up.

Neither the clinical trial nor the subsequent business venture—by any definition, it was a conflict of interest.

"Exactly. So, don’t you think it’s rather simplistic to suspect me just because the payments were made in Japanese yen? I’m a businesswoman. I don't involve myself in unprofitable ventures."

Wasn’t she supposed to be a master detective?

Could it be that this agency director actually longed for the return of the dark days when the Japanese were called "economic animals"?

"Ms. Kyoko, even so, the fact remains that clinical trials are indeed taking place. And we’ve verified that a fixed amount of money was exchanged in Japanese yen."

"Speaking of money tricks, it’s like a ninja technique."

She deflected the conversation, then added:

"If someone distributed ineffective supplements and swindled innocent customers out of their money, that would certainly meet the criteria for fraud. But in this case, the perpetrator is making a significant investment. We have to assume there’s some effectiveness. At least, the perpetrator seems to believe so."

The Forgetful Detective reasoned.

Ms. Kyoko was the one who first hypothesized that 'Hyoro-Gan' had some effect, and she seemed to be sticking to her guns—even if it made her the prime suspect.

"If that’s the case, we can strongly infer that 'Hyoro-Gan' currently has effects beyond what we understand—beyond what we know. Don’t you think there’s some secret that makes it different from just a regular survival food or superfood?"

"Hmm…"

Hearing this, Officer Rivaldi made a gesture as if deep in thought.

A secret pill that not only provided ten days' worth of calories but also granted the iron willpower to resist culinary temptations for those ten days—a secret, miraculous pill indeed.

One might take a cynical view and say that Ms. Kyoko was deliberately trying to obscure the charges against her by introducing more mysteries instead of solving them… but as a defense argument, it wasn't entirely off the mark.

Just then, dessert arrived.

Ms. Kyoko’s New York cheesecake was enormous, as if the entire cake had been shaped into an isosceles triangle—it made the officer feel queasy just looking at it. Compared to that, her ice cream looked so modest.

"If there is indeed a secret about 'HYORO-GAN' that we haven’t uncovered yet, how do you plan to find out what that is? If it were you, Kyoko-san?"

Officer Rivaldi, who hadn’t ordered any dessert, asked this while sipping his after-dinner coffee—Officer Casteiz, on a whim, had ordered tea, but was curious about how the coffee here would compare to the one served at the Okitegami Detective Agency.

"Honestly, I’d like to get my hands on the actual product."

"The actual product?"

"The 'HYORO-GAN' found inside the victim, Ms. Randyl, was already mostly digested, making precise analysis quite difficult. And you said that it wasn’t detected in the other three victims’ bodies—if we could obtain the actual 'HYORO-GAN' that’s being distributed, I think the investigation would make significant progress."

Not just progress—one could go so far as to say it would practically solve the case—providing undeniable evidence against the culprit.

But the substance itself remained elusive.

It was called 'HYORO-GAN,' but whether it was a pill or not wasn’t even clear yet. It was likely an oral medication, but it could be contained within a capsule to mask the bitterness.

"No, obtaining it shouldn’t be that difficult at this point. Since we discovered a missing link—a regular, fixed amount being transferred between the four victims—, if we search for a resident of Broadway who receives fifty thousand yen every ten days, that would be our 'HYORO-GAN' user."

That was right. The officer had overlooked it.

After it was revealed that the transfers were in Japanese yen, they had completely veered off onto a separate track, but originally, they had been searching for a missing link to narrow down the suspects—or to broaden them. And now they had what they needed: a way to identify those who remained silent precisely because the 'HYORO-GAN' was working.

Even if the amount was converted to dollars and no longer appeared as a fixed sum numerically, if they could identify a dancer who received anonymous transfers three times a month, that person should be in possession of 'HYORO-GAN.'

If someone had it, they could seize it.

"To prevent 'HYORO-GAN' from being overeaten and resulting in an overdose, it’s possible that during the clinical trial, they might only distribute one pill at a time. Unless we catch them at just the right moment, even if we identify them, won’t it be too late, as they’ll have already taken it?"

Her boss, who’d always been an expert at throwing cold water on things, made a sharp observation—like a suspect backed into a corner, desperate enough to eat incriminating evidence, catching someone with the actual pill before consumption wouldn't be easy.

"Couldn’t we recruit a collaborator after identifying them? If they’ve distributed it to enough people to conduct a clinical trial, there's bound to be at least one person willing to betray their benefactor for the right price."

A thousand people.

Last time, they had made that assumption very roughly, but even if it were a hundred, and they could identify half of them—well, realistically, one of them would likely betray their employer.

She was saying something quite drastic while eating sweet cake—they'd have this "traitor" procure the next 'HYORO-GAN' dosage as planned, then hand it over for analysis. Simple as that.

Officer Rivaldi, frowning into his coffee cup, clearly didn’t find this deceptive investigation method agreeable, but at this point, they couldn’t afford to be picky. Besides, it was a bit late to object to civilian cooperation in an investigation.

They were already treating the prime suspect, an illegal immigrant from Japan no less, to a lavish steak dinner. Accusations of collusion were practically unavoidable at this point.

Compared to that, a little undercover work was nothing… Of course, if they could obtain 'HYORO-GAN' before it was taken, during the identification process, all the better. And if they could find a user directly connected to the perpetrator, that would be ideal.

"In any case, it doesn’t seem like something that can be done in a day or two, and while it pains me that I won’t be able to witness the conclusion of the case with my own eyes, I wish the NYPD the best of luck."

Ms. Kyoko, having somehow already devoured her monstrous cheesecake, clasped her hands together and offered those words—Officer Casteiz had heard that, surprisingly, Japanese people didn’t usually do that, so she wondered if it was a gesture of gratitude or a prayer.

As usual, she didn’t seem particularly regretful.

Although she had been suspected of something unreasonable, for the time being, she had survived the day, fulfilling her responsibility as "today’s Ms. Kyoko"—perhaps leaving the future to "tomorrow's Ms. Kyoko," which, while not exactly dismissive, could be seen as shirking responsibility.

The policewoman wasn't sure if she should thank the detective for her "cooperation," especially since she'd only muddied the waters further—but considering all that, Officer Casteiz forced out a "Thank you," adhering to Japanese social graces, before adding,

"Do you have any other advice?"

She asked this as a final question as the high-priced dinner was about to come to a close—regardless of how the investigation progressed, there was no doubt they would meet again on this matter, but this would be the last moment with "today’s Ms. Kyoko". In Japanese, it was referred to as 'ICHIGOICHIE', a once-in-a-lifetime encounter. Thinking of Randyl Rascuette, who left a note about 'HYORO-GAN,' this wasn’t exactly a will or a dying message, but if the white-haired woman had anything left to say, the officer wanted to make sure to capture it.

"Well then, since you’re kind enough to ask… when you meet me next, please tell 'her' this: Why was the clinical trial payment made in Japanese yen? Tell 'her' to think carefully about the reason."

The question of "why" was likely intended to ask why the payment was made in Japanese yen if the Japanese assassination unit 'SHINOBI' wasn’t involved in this murder case, or rather, in the clinical trial of 'HYORO-GAN.' But this might have been a delicate issue, requiring some courage to delve into. If the reason for pretending to be the 'SHINOBI' assassination unit was, for example, to frame Japanese illegal immigrants out of malice, it could complicate international relations further—if identifying the mastermind would not solve the case but rather create societal turmoil, then it would be a particularly unmotivating investigation.

Of course, whether motivated or not, Officer Casteiz had no choice but to continue the investigation in strict adherence to the rules… namely, the sampling survey of the financial status of Broadway performers.

That said, doing it completely at random would be endless, so they narrowed down the targets from the start. They began with minor dancers who might have been the target for the clinical trial… that is, actors who, while not economically destitute, were not financially well-off, those struggling in the industry.

She would report to her boss, who detested social inequality, afterward.

From Officer Casteiz’ perspective, she didn't condone the disparity, but it existed, and ignoring it wouldn't make it disappear. Considering all factors, it didn’t seem likely that top stars would have any reason to get involved with 'HYORO-GAN.'

On the contrary, the culprit was exploiting such social inequality, expecting to profit in the future—so even if they were paying a substantial reward, they were essentially exploiting those who were not wealthy, if not exactly the poor.

The fact that they were paying made it even more insidious.

It was akin to a type of domestic violence where by financially supporting a partner, the abuser strips them of their ability to be self-sufficient… Thinking about it that way, even if it ultimately caused social chaos, they couldn’t afford to slack off in identifying the culprit.

As the investigation continued, motivation increased—this was likely because, in contrast to the previous frustrating investigations, the results were visible from the start.

Even if it wasn’t a thousand, there were over a hundred performers whose finances showed suspicious transfers—exactly fifty thousand yen, converted at the exchange rate of the day, deposited once every ten days.

Although they were prepared for a certain number of people when they started investigating with the clinical trial in mind, actually seeing such a large number of people involved brought a sense of accomplishment, along with a slight feeling of being "in over their heads."

It didn’t feel like the job of the homicide division.

However, without needing to file a report, she knew her boss would never allow it.

Officer Rivaldi, who disliked territorialism, rarely engaged in jurisdictional disputes, but conversely, that meant he wouldn’t allow an ongoing investigation to be abandoned simply because it was outside their jurisdiction. He wouldn’t hesitate to clash with detectives from other departments if it meant solving the case—knowing this all too well, Officer Casteiz had no choice but to continue considering the situation.

What situation, you ask? The situation of identifying a suitable "traitor".

Ms. Kyoko's blunt terminology made her uncomfortable. She preferred "informant," but how would they approach these aspiring stars, likely bound by strict confidentiality agreements, and convince one to betray their benefactor?

Once they realize a government official had been snooping around their finances, it was unlikely they'd be cooperative. And since the officers might need them to testify in court, the police couldn't exactly entice them with a reward larger than what the perpetrator was giving them, even if they called it a 'cooperation fee.' Doing so could easily turn a witness hostile.

Appealing to their sense of justice and conscience was the only option.

However, if they had a strong sense of lawfulness, one could argue that they wouldn’t have participated in such an illegal clinical trial in the first place, so there was a limit to how far they could go with idealistic and noble-sounding arguments—what kind of criteria should they use to select the right people?

It was already a delicate situation, approaching those who believed their diets were successful and telling them they were wrong, that they should cooperate with the police. 'It's not their weight that's weighing on me...' Just as that thought crossed her mind, it hit her.

Interfering with someone whose diet was going smoothly was a heavy burden. Which meant, targeting those whose diets aren't going well, those feeling stuck, and offering them a way out—wouldn't that minimize their guilt and make the person more susceptible to betrayal?

It was a rather predatory way of thinking, like a hyena preying on unfortunate people, but considering that the person in question could end up dying of malnutrition if left alone, there was no doubt it would be an act of saving a life.

Even if a drug was approved by the country and formally prescribed by a pharmacist, there was no such thing as a medicine that worked for everyone. Much less something like 'HYORO-GAN.' There had already been four casualties.

Even if the mortality rate was only 0.4%, the broader the scope of the clinical trial, the higher the likelihood that the number of victims would increase—in that situation, she was reluctant to use the phrase "in for a penny, in for a pound," but let’s look for dancers participating in the clinical trial who had a history of hospital visits.

That would be a thorough invasion of privacy.

Shamelessly digging into their medical histories.

But if there were any symptoms that could serve as a warning before they dramatically starved to death on stage, such as low blood sugar or something similar, there should be someone who visited their regular doctor at a general hospital—after all, one of the four victims had died while hospitalized for such a reason.

It would be best if they could prevent a repeat of that situation.

After going through such a process and inner struggle, Officer Casteiz narrowed down the candidates for an informant to five people—up to this point, she had conducted this extreme violation of human rights quietly and on her own authority, but from there on, she couldn’t proceed without involving her noisy boss.

Or rather, from this point on, it was the perfect moment for the human rights-oriented, sharp detective, Officer Rivaldi, to step in—to borrow a theatrical term, this was his "cue."

Until now, she had privately harbored various complaints, grumblings, dissatisfaction, and criticisms about her difficult boss, Officer Rivaldi. However, he had consistently shown a genuine concern for the citizens rather than just putting on a performance, and was surprisingly well-regarded by public opinion.

Because of his good reputation, he was difficult for the authorities to deal with, and plainly put, they couldn’t easily fire him, but he was the right person for behind-the-scenes negotiations and persuasion in cases like this.

Even Officer Casteiz, the watchful observer, knew it was best to stay out of his way during this negotiation—after all, despite everything, she couldn’t entirely rid herself of the feeling of resentment towards the 'HYORO-GAN' users who participated in such a clinical trial, eagerly taking the mysterious drug, but then kept their mouths shut when the police came to question them.

She didn’t want to interfere with Officer Rivaldi’s overly sincere efforts, which, from a colleague’s perspective, were excessive—he was genuinely determined to prevent any further victims… She even thought that if he couldn’t persuade them, then no one could.

"I understand. You want me to request these five people to provide the 'HYORO-GAN,' right?"

He didn’t seem particularly enthusiastic, but Officer Rivaldi didn’t ask how those five people were selected.

He was, after all, an old hand at this.

In a way, it was a terrible role, like being forced to clean up after a reckless subordinate, but it was precisely that kind of job that Officer Rivaldi knew was part of being a boss. For her, it was a rare situation that instilled a sense of accountability for her actions.

"Yes. If even one of them agrees, it would be a great find. As long as we can get our hands on even a single pill of 'HYORO-GAN,' we can send it for component analysis—"

"If we’re going to do this, I’ll make sure to persuade all five. After all, compared to the joint investigation we’ve been conducting with a certain someone lately, asking good citizens for their cooperation is easy as pie, or as they say in Japanese, 'before breakfast.'"

Quite right.

Even if they weren’t on a diet, it was hard to imagine that any of the subjects—let alone one out of a thousand—would be so shameless as to demand steak for dinner. Even if you searched all of Manhattan, you’d only find one person like that.

8

"Nice to meet you. I’m Kyoko Okitegami, a detective."

Even on the third visit, the welcome from the Forgetful Detective was, of course, exactly the same—despite being in New York, she carelessly left the front door wide open, not even using the chain lock, and invited the two 'unfamiliar' detectives inside without properly checking their police badges.

As always, it made them feel like they were the ones who needed to be cautious. As a detective, had she mastered Baritsu, the Japanese martial art, or perhaps some sort of ninja skills as part of an assassination unit...?

"I’ll brew some coffee, so please wait a moment."

The policewoman glanced at Officer Rivaldi to see what he would do today, but it seemed he had decided to accept the offer—well, it wasn’t going to be a short conversation anyway, and frankly, he might have preferred a strong drink over coffee, given the nature of this visit.

"So, what brings detectives from the NYPD, whom I admire so much, here today? I can solve any case in a day."

She had completely forgotten that she was a suspect last time and was now pitching her services as if it were déjà vu—now, but where to start? There was really no choice but to start from the beginning with the Forgetful Detective, but since it was they third time explaining, they couldn't help but think about how to structure it.

Especially since there hadn't been much progress.

No, saying there hasn't been progress would be misleading, and it would risk tarnishing the reputation of the boss who acted on Officer Casteiz' report—Officer Rivaldi, who had gone head-to-head with the five informant candidates and done a perfect job. And that wasn't just the biased view of a subordinate.

"I've been thinking about what you said, Kyoko-san."

While Officer Casteiz was hesitating on how to start, Officer Rivaldi, perhaps impatient this time, took out a pill case from his pocket, placed it on the table, and kept speaking.

"What kind of secret is hidden in this 'HYORO-GAN'? What makes it different from so-called health foods, emergency rations for mountain climbers, or even military rations—what exactly is being tested on Broadway in this organized manner? And then, I arrived at a conclusion."

Without any explanation, he jumped straight into the key point, which likely left Ms. Kyoko completely bewildered, but even so, the Forgetful Detective didn't interrupt—she listened with a smile, as if she were following along with 'the story so far.'

Was there a new article about it plastered on her wall? Had it been featured in this morning's newspaper? No, this case was already being forgotten not just by Ms. Kyoko, but by the public as well… so this was simply the Forgetful Detective's way of saying, "Let's hear everything first."

In that case, Officer Casteiz also couldn't interrupt—she understood the feelings of her impatient boss.

"No matter how high-calorie it is, I agree that people should still crave other foods, and I understand that if it's too delicious, they might overeat."

Officer Rivaldi gestured to the pill case as he spoke.

Indeed, inside the case was 'HYORO-GAN'—the long-awaited actual substance from the East. Moreover, the skilled detective hadn't obtained just one pill—he had secured five 'HYORO-GAN' pills from the five informants.

Five Hyoro-Gan pills, offered willingly, not confiscated.

The relationship between the citizens and the police was in the best possible form one could imagine—although Officer Casteiz decided not to accompany him, now she wished she had tagged along to observe his negotiation for future reference in her career as an officer.

However...

"My conclusion was this. This 'HYORO-GAN' isn't some high-calorie health food packed with ten days' worth of nutrients, but rather a secret medicine that suppresses hunger and the sensation of starvation—"

In other words, it was a kind of sedative.

By suppressing one's appetite, the desire to eat was also suppressed—naturally, there was no risk of overeating, nor would they reach for other dishes. After all, they neither felt hungry nor found food appealing.

It was impossible not to lose weight that way.

It was terrifyingly effective, yet at the same time, an inhumane treatment—after all, it aimed to delete one of the three basic human desires. It was like inflicting physical damage on the brain rather than on the digestive organs.

Of course, this might be an acceptable measure in extreme cases... for example, when further obesity was life-threatening, it could be a viable option. However, the clinical trial currently being conducted on Broadway was clearly targeting healthy individuals.

It was actually endangering lives.

What had happened to the Hippocratic Oath?

Medical procedures for slimming down, like liposuction or digestive organ removal, had advanced like computers, and she didn’t intend to deny the aesthetic standards of those who stood in front of an audience. Still, if you died, that was the end of the story.

What was unforgivable is that they were exploiting such aesthetic standards... it was exploitation.

"In this context, speaking of exploitation, it’s almost like they're squeezing out the money of those who want to squeeze their waistline, isn’t it?"

That was the first response they got from the master detective?

Well, from Ms. Kyoko's perspective, they had jumped straight into the heart of the matter without giving her the full context. She probably felt obligated to play along for the time being. And yet...

Weren't Japanese people supposed to be good at reading the room?

"Yes, we are. That's why I could read that Officer Rivaldi's conclusion was off."

Her words, delivered with such a cheerful demeanor, left Officer Casteiz speechless. Or rather, the latter's silence in the face of her astute observation seemed to prompt her to continue.

To put it in the style of a Japanese 'TANKA,' it was like the second half of the poem.

"You couldn't confirm such medicinal effects from the 'HYORO-GAN' you obtained, could you? If you had, you wouldn't be visiting this small-time detective agency—this is the place you come to when you've hit a dead end."

She said something that could be taken either as self-deprecating or boastful, but she was right.

They had a total of five 'HYORO-GAN' pills, one from each informant. They kept two as a precaution and sent the remaining three to different labs for analysis. The results were unanimous: inconclusive.

At the very least, it bore no resemblance to existing sedatives, nor could it be classified as either a poison or a medicine. In fact, the report suggested it was doubtful whether it was even food. In short, after much effort and finally obtaining the actual substance, the conclusion was that "nothing was known"—truly an Eastern secret medicine.

Was it the product of ninja techniques rather than medical science?

This brought them back to square one, asking the fundamental question, "What exactly is HYORO-GAN?" It was like rewinding to the point where they needed to ask the Japanese culture advisor.

"Hmm. I'm not in a position to give advice since I don't have the details, but can't you ask the five participants who provided the 'HYORO-GAN' where it came from? How were they approached, and how did they come to receive the superfood? Even if the payments were anonymous, combining the testimonies of the five might reveal the identity of the mastermind."

Ninja or whoever it might be.

That was the nuance of Ms. Kyoko's suggestion, but unfortunately, it wasn't that simple. Officer Casteiz would have much preferred following standard procedures instead of resorting to wiping her shoes on the doormat of a rundown detective agency. However, the informants who had provided the actual 'HYORO-GAN' pills firmly refused to give any testimony.

"As expected, it seems that confidentiality agreements were signed for the clinical trial. Apparently, the contract included a clause stating that if they judged the pill to be life-threatening, they didn't have to take it and could simply report that fact. It seems that silently handing over the leftover pills to us fell into a gray area of the contract."

"*Giggle*. Confidentiality agreements, huh?"

Ms. Kyoko seemed to imply that no one was better than her when it came to confidentiality, and Officer Casteiz thought the same, but the five individuals were surprisingly tight-lipped.

They hadn't forgotten about the contract.

For them, it was supposed to be a side job where they could earn regular rewards along with dieting, killing two birds with one stone, but if they faced the possibility of being sued for enormous damages, they couldn't just talk about justice and ethics.

They remained silent.

In that sense, targeting participants with a history of hospital visits, who likely had leftover 'HYORO-GAN,' had been a successful choice by Officer Casteiz. However...

"We couldn't even get them to tell us how the pills made them feel. Whether their appetite decreased, whether they experienced hypoglycemia from malnutrition, or whether they simply liked or disliked the taste. They insisted that they could only report their findings to the contractor."

The recipient of the reports, as well as the reporting method, was, of course, also shrouded in secrecy.

If they were part of the assassination unit 'SHINOBI,' maybe they'd send a hawk... or perhaps they'd send a ninja dog.

If they continued tailing all the known participants, they might eventually discover the secret manufacturing site of 'HYORO-GAN,' but... who knew when that would be. Even now, Broadway's show must go on.

"Still, knowing that it could saddle a promising young person with debt, we can't exactly force them to testify."

"Can't you arrest them on suspicion of cooperating in an illegal clinical trial?"

The detective asked innocently, but arresting them after they had cooperated, free of charge and at great personal risk, would be a betrayal of their trust.

Oh, how the officer wished she could be as carefree and nonchalant as Ms. Kyoko, who always seemed to slip away from trouble... not just slip away, but she was even carving up steaks at a steakhouse. That too was probably a distant memory for her now—ah, right.

They were at a dead end, yes, but it was that final remark during their previous dinner that had led them back to this old apartment building.

Clinging to a sliver of hope.

To put it plainly, today, they weren't guides but messengers.

"Ms. Kyoko. This might sound strange, but I have a message for you."

"That does sound likely. Let's hear it."

In hindsight, since they hadn't yet explained the outline of the case, it might not make sense to deliver just this message, but it wasn't only Officer Rivaldi who was getting ahead of himself. If there was too much preamble, it could bias Ms. Kyoko's deductions, as they had learned the hard way.

It was a bitter memory, but as long as the policewoman remembered, she had to learn from it.

As a living memo of the Forgetful Detective, Officer Casteiz said,

"'Why were the clinical trial payments made in Japanese yen? Think carefully about the reason.'"

She reproduced it as accurately as she could recall, even down to the tone, like a human voice recorder—Ms. Kyoko's reaction to this was,

"Huh. So the payments were made in Japanese yen."

It was a momentarily delayed response.

By now, it was common knowledge treated as a given fact—but surely, even Ms. Kyoko, who was full from steak, hadn't intended to convey that to her future self as common sense.

"I think it implies that if the assassination unit 'SHINOBI' isn't behind this case, then..."

Unable to hold back, the officer added that bit of explanation.

"What did you just say?"

Ms. Kyoko turned her whole body toward Officer Casteiz—shifting from her typical slow-paced demeanor to a more focused one.

'Huh? Did I say something?'

As a now-regular customer of this office, it wasn't the officer's first time being asked that kind of stock phrase by Ms. Kyoko, but this time, she really only intended to elaborate on a cryptic message...

"…Assistant Officer Casteiz. Please repeat what you just said to Kyoko-san," Officer Rivaldi prompted with a sigh.

Still not understanding the significance, she repeated, "If the assassination unit 'SHINOBI' isn't behind this case, then…"

But before she could finish,

"If there's no 'SHINOBI,' then there's no 'HYORO-GAN' either—that's what you mean, right?"

Ms. Kyoko interrupted.

It was an abrupt, speeding violation of an interruption.

"You're underestimating me. If that's the case, there's no need to overthink the reason."

No, it wasn't anyone else but 'the other day's Ms. Kyoko' who had underestimated 'today's Ms. Kyoko'… But if she was speaking with such confidence, she must have an idea.

As they watched, holding their breath, the Forgetful Detective pointed to the pill case on the table.

"May I open it?"

It was a mystery in itself why her tone suddenly had become so ladylike, but given the current situation where there was a mystery they desperately wanted solved, Officer Rivaldi could only say, "By all means."

Come to think of it, Ms. Kyoko hadn't even heard the full outline of the case, let alone seen the actual 'HYORO-GAN' in the true sense of the word—if she didn't open the case and see what's inside, the conversation couldn't really begin.

It would be unfortunate if the NYPD were misunderstood as bluffing with an empty pill case.

"Then, excuse me."

Perhaps to avoid leaving fingerprints, Ms. Kyoko pulled out a pair of thin gloves from nowhere (again, in a very ladylike manner) and put them on. She then picked up the pill case—handling it as carefully as if it were a marriage ring offered during a proposal—and gently opened the lid.

When they first visited her about this case, Ms. Kyoko had compared the HYORO-GAN to "Nachiguro," a type of Japanese candy, and indeed, inside was a small, black pill, about 0.5 inches in diameter, sitting quietly.

Even though some time had passed, and the drawing on her left arm from the first day had likely been wiped away, the 'Hyoro-Gan' was exactly like the one the Forgetful Detective had drawn—she had claimed it was to scale, but surely that wouldn't expose any secrets.

"Hmm. It looks like a supplement that was hand-rolled. It seems like a small-scale industrial product—by Japanese standards, it’s not small at all. Just as with clothing and shoe sizes, the size of pills reflects body size differences too, doesn’t it?"

Ms. Kyoko examined the 'HYORO-GAN' from various angles, as if she were appraising a jewel—her actions were so convincing that both Officer Casteiz and likely Officer Rivaldi as well were lulled into a false sense of security.

In hindsight, they should have realized that her inspection motions were too slow for the fastest detective.

"To avoid any misunderstandings, I’d like to confirm verbally—this 'HYORO-GAN' is one of the two remaining pills out of the five provided by the trial participants, with the other three sent for analysis, correct?"

"That’s correct, but is that important? There shouldn’t be any differences between the individual 'HYORO-GAN' pills."

At least, the three pills randomly selected for analysis had exactly the same components—though they couldn’t determine the effects, they were able to identify that much. Of course, if you only consider probabilities, it was possible that the two remaining pills, which hadn’t been selected, could have a different composition… While the policewoman was thinking this,

"I'm glad to hear that. I couldn’t try it if it were the last pill—in Japan, you could call this kind of modesty 'the leftover out of courtesy.'"

As soon as she shared this little nugget of Japanese culture, Ms. Kyoko pinched the 'HYORO-GAN'—without getting permission from Officer Rivaldi, she casually touched the piece of evidence. For a moment, Officer Casteiz thought, oh, so that’s why the detective put on the gloves—not for the fingerprints, but to avoid touching the unknown pill directly in case it caused

a skin reaction. But then, Ms. Kyoko went beyond simply touching it; she popped the HYORO-GAN into her mouth.

As casually as if it were popcorn or Konpeito candy.

At the very least—she wouldn’t have swallowed it if it were Nachiguro.

The fluid motion with which she swallowed it, after her previously slow, almost Noh-theater-like movements, was lightning-fast—no sooner had she swallowed it than she grabbed her coffee cup with her other hand and washed the pill down into her digestive system.

"Kyoko-san! What on earth are you—"

More surprised than an audience discovering an unexpected plot twist in a mystery film, both Officer Casteiz and Officer Rivaldi jumped up from the sofa in unison—it wasn't often that they were so in sync.

"It’s a clinical trial. Or rather, a human experiment."

In stark contrast, Ms. Kyoko remained calm—she elegantly wiped her mouth with a handkerchief, then, without making a sound, returned the coffee cup to its saucer.

It was as graceful as a 'SADO' tea ceremony, despite having just downed a pill and a gulp of coffee.

"It wasn’t particularly tasty. In fact, it was flavorless and odorless. The theory that it’s so delicious that you don’t want to eat anything else is clearly disproven—now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll take a nap. Please wake me up in an hour."

'When I wake up, let’s all go eat pancakes together.'

9

In his efforts to break away from old-fashioned ideas, Officer Rivaldi was a strong advocate for gender equality. However, he also held a delicate belief that it wasn't gentlemanly to barge into a woman’s bedroom while she was sleeping, resulting in Officer Casteiz being solely responsible for waking Ms. Kyoko.

Given the living room’s decor, heavily adorned with wall newspapers, the officer was somewhat curious, though admittedly inappropriate, about what the Forgetful Detective's bedroom might look like. But when the hour had passed and she finally gathered the courage to enter, she found it to be incredibly neat—so neat, in fact, that she wondered if this really was a room in that old, decrepit apartment building. It was a room overflowing with cleanliness—there was nothing in it except a small second-hand bed.

Even though it was a small bed by American standards, for the petite Ms. Kyoko, it might as well have been queen-sized—the repaired walls had no newspapers, and not even posters. Looking up at the ceiling, there was just a ceiling light.

The wardrobe… wasn't there either.

This bedroom was vastly different from the adjacent room in terms of the amount of information. It was as if she had moved out within the past hour. The wall newspapers were meant to absorb as much current affairs information as possible at the beginning of each day, but perhaps even the Forgetful Detective preferred to wake up to a plain environment… Or so the policewoman thought as she looked at Ms. Kyoko, who was lying in bed wrapped in a thin blanket.

Although she said it was just a nap, Ms. Kyoko had changed into pajamas and was sleeping soundly, her face the picture of tranquility. It felt a bit wrong to pull her back to reality from such a dreamy state, but this was work—never in her wildest dreams did she imagine that waking a soundly sleeping detective would be part of the job in the NYPD Homicide Division.

Guide, messenger, and now alarm clock…

That level of diversity would make even Officer Rivaldi turn pale.

"Ms. Kyoko. Ms. Kyoko. It's time to wake up—though it's not morning."

"*Mumble, mumble*… Huh…? Who might you be?"

Even the Forgetful Detective, who would invite a pair of strangers—man and woman—into her room without a chain lock, seemed to at least check who was in the room when she woke up to find herself face-to-face with a woman she didn't recognize.

"I'm Assistant Officer Casteiz. From the NYPD—"

As Ms. Kyoko listened to Officer Casteiz, who once again introduced himself while showing his badge for who knew how many times, the girl checked the handwritten ID on her left arm—'I am Kyoko Okitegami, detective. My memory resets every day. Currently overstaying in New York, etc.'

"I see. I understand most of it."

"You do?"

Even though she had said that with sleepy eyes, as if only half-awake, the officer couldn't help but want to argue that such a thing was impossible. However, since the detective herself insisted, Officer Casteiz had no choice but to respond,

"Well then… shall we go get some pancakes to wake you up, Ms. Kyoko?"

It wasn’t a joke; this was exactly what Ms. Kyoko had instructed her to say before going to bed—word for word. In response, Ms. Kyoko's eyes snapped open as if she had finally woken up.

"That sounds nice. I've never had New York pancakes before. I've heard they stack them as thick as steaks. I'd love to try them with a generous helping of blueberry jam."

She sat up as she spoke—whether she hadn’t eaten them or had eaten them and forgotten was still unclear, but one thing had become clear from her reaction.

The true nature of the Eastern secret medicine, "HYORO-GAN."

To be precise, it was confirmed that it had no true nature.

Even Officer Casteiz, who hadn’t known Ms. Kyoko very long but could no longer consider their relationship shallow, had figured out that her declaration to take a nap was actually a way to reset the memories she had accumulated up to that point—even if it was a "first meeting" for her. However, if she only wanted to reset her memory, Ms. Kyoko would lose her memory even with a brief moment of dozing off, not necessarily a nap.

Yet, the fact that she had set Officer Casteiz as her alarm clock to wake her exactly an hour later was to allow time for the "HYORO-GAN" she had swallowed to be digested and absorbed.

It wasn't about absorbing current events, but about absorbing the secret medicine.

The officer had been told in advance to invite her for pancakes when she woke up—to observe how Ms. Kyoko, with her memory reset, would respond to the invitation after fully ingesting the mysterious pill.

If the "HYORO-GAN" had the appetite-suppressing effect that Officer Rivaldi had feared, she would have declined the invitation—especially since the person waking her was a "stranger" who had rudely disturbed her peaceful sleep.

Alternatively, even if it were a high-calorie superfood that induced a feeling of fullness, she wouldn't be craving pancakes right after ingesting it, when she would likely be feeling heavy in the stomach.

It would have been too taxing on her internal organs.

Yet, despite this, Ms. Kyoko, upon being woken, literally "bit" at the temptation of pancakes—this was a reaction that would never have occurred if the "HYORO-GAN" had any effects or efficacy.

In other words, the conclusion was obvious.

A placebo effect—in other words, a placebo.

Literally, the Forgetful Detective was unaware of the "HYORO-GAN" and its supposed effects because she conveniently reset her memory, erasing even the reprehensible memory of boldly ingesting evidence right under the nose of two officers.

Whether it was the poison it was initially claimed to be, the health food discussed midway, or the medicine debated at the end, Ms. Kyoko, as the subject, was completely unaware—because she had no awareness that she had taken the "HYORO-GAN," a product proudly created by the assassination unit "SHINOBI," it had no effect.

The pill had been subjected to analysis by multiple sections but ultimately proved impossible to analyze—this could also be interpreted as meaning that no medicinal properties, or any illegal substances, were found.

You couldn’t find something that wasn’t there. It was only natural.

But in reality, the investigation became confused because there was a perceived "effect"—of course, if there were no effect, there’s no way it would have spread among more than a hundred, or even a thousand, people living on Broadway. The original second hypothesis, which assumed that the investigation was based on the premise that the "HYORO-GAN" had effects and efficacy, wasn’t entirely wrong.

That being said, it was frustrating to think that the NYPD's actions, particularly their diligent and painstaking investigation, might have inadvertently reinforced the credibility of 'HYORO-GAN'—their very involvement might have led people to believe in its authenticity, using the logic that the police wouldn't be so invested if it were fake.

"The fact that the clinical trial payments were made in Japanese yen was just a performance. It was meant to create a sense of authenticity. They likely banked on the allure of an 'ancient Eastern secret medicine' that supposedly traces back to the assassination unit 'SHINOBI'—a seemingly plausible backstory, to resonate with the theatricality of Broadway."

When conducting a clinical trial, a double-blind study should be used to eliminate the placebo effect, yet the perpetrator, incredibly, had used the clinical trial itself to establish the placebo effect.

Even if it was illegal, the assumption that the placebo effect was eliminated due to the image of a clinical trial of an unknown secret medicine was a misdirection itself. In reality, it was a clinical trial cleverly designed to control the placebo effect—who would have thought?

It was infuriatingly clever.

They were promoting a harmless, ineffective substance—tasteless, odorless, non-toxic, non-nutritive, difficult to analyze, but ultimately benign—as a 'health supplement' under the guise of a confidential trial. Their plan was to establish a buzz among aspiring stars and eventually turn it into a legitimate business. Even if it had no real effect, as long as the placebo effect was strong enough, it would be difficult to prosecute them for fraud.

Even if it did have the unethical effect of suppressing appetite, as long as it was attributed to the user's willpower, it could be argued as a matter of personal freedom, difficult to prosecute. It was a pill that targeted the mind, not the body.

"Well, isn't this within your area of expertise? Even if it can't be prosecuted as fraud or a violation of pharmaceutical laws—it can be charged as murder."

Not content with just talking about food, Ms. Kyoko's mouth was putting in the hours as she sliced into her pancakes, which were topped with plenty of blueberry jam as she had declared, in a popular restaurant which had become a word-of-mouth sensation.

She told the homicide detectives that they should charge the culprits with murder.

"The power of suggestion was so strong that at least four people have died. The fact that there have been casualties only strengthens the legend of 'HYORO-GAN,' creating a vicious cycle. This level of orchestrated nocebo effect is nothing short of criminal."

Even if it was harmless, it became harmful if it caused harm.

Even if it was innocent, it became guilty if it led to guilt.

Since Ms. Kyoko, whose memory had been reset and was therefore as unbiased as a juror, said it without any preconceptions, it might be worth prosecuting on those charges.

In fact, Officer Casteiz had no intention of letting them off just because it wasn't illegal. And Inspector Ribaldi? He would likely say it was even less forgivable because it wasn't illegal.

If anorexia and overeating were ultimately considered psychological in nature, then "HYORO-GAN," which forced a diet based on mental discipline, deserved to be prosecuted as a crime—speaking of crime, the human experiment Ms. Kyoko conducted on herself, thanks to her resettable memory, was also quite criminal, and whether or not there was a confidentiality agreement, it was certainly not something that could be written directly in a report. However,

thanks to that, they were able to expose the truth about 'HYORO-GAN,' or rather, the lack thereof.

By subtly revealing this truth during our interviews, they could potentially convince more test subjects to come forward, rendering their confidentiality agreements meaningless. It might be the opposite of a discreet investigation, but if it led them to the mastermind, it would be worth it.

Even if things didn’t go that smoothly, just being able to quell the hype around "HYORO-GAN," which they had inadvertently fueled, would be a relief.

It was unfortunate for the young people who would lose a novel diet method or a steady side income… but at least for the former, new methods had been emerging and would continue to emerge forever, just like they had in the past.

Unlike ninjas, they weren't going extinct anytime soon.

The diet must go on.

"But Ms. Kyoko, I really hope this is the last time you do something so reckless. It was only good luck that your deduction was correct, but using yourself as a test subject… What would you have done if the 'HYORO-GAN' really had the effects everyone was whispering about?"

Officer Rivaldi, having been dragged to a stylish café that didn’t require dressing up, listened to the story and then offered his sharp criticism—though it was a bit out of place since he was eating ricotta cheese pancakes as he spoke. Still, it might have been a battle against the prejudice that an old man and Instagram-worthy pancakes didn’t go together.

Nevertheless, despite the comical juxtaposition, it was an entirely valid criticism.

Swallowing a pill that could cause brain damage or, in the worst case, even death from malnutrition was dangerous behavior no matter how you looked at it—even if it had passed clinical trials conducted under due process, no drug was completely safe. Officer Casteiz, who had ordered a soufflé pancake, which was quite unique for this restaurant, couldn’t fully enjoy its taste despite the rare opportunity.

The one hour she spent waiting to wake Ms. Kyoko felt like an eternity—she felt as though she was wasting away. She even considered her own future, thinking this might finally be the time to resign. Though it was odd to be thinking about her own future at a time like this, taking care of oneself was important.

"Even if you tell me that, I have no memory of it at all."

In contrast, Ms. Kyoko remained calm—it was an evasive statement that made one want to retort, "If I don't tell you, then who?" But to the Forgetful Detective herself, anything that happened before she fell asleep was practically ancient history.

"However, Officer Rivaldi, it wasn't just by chance that my deduction was correct. I strongly protest that point as a detective. I don't remember it, but I must have had some sort of certainty—whether it was confidence or conviction. The fact that I'm immune to the romanticized image of the East must have played a significant role too."

Was it because she was an illegal immigrant from Japan that she was able to see through the façade? You never knew what might work in your favor. Perhaps even if she hadn't reset her memory, the "HYORO-GAN" might not have had a placebo effect on her.

"On the contrary, we Japanese are easily swayed by taglines like 'All of America cried!' We even call blue-colored sugar water 'Blue Hawaii,' so we're well aware of the importance of image manipulation. It's like how people who live in Tokyo don't bother going up Tokyo Tower, regardless of whether they're from the East or the West."

Indeed, Officer Casteiz, when she lived in San Jose, would visit Los Angeles more often than San Francisco—one wondered how New Yorkers viewed a California-born college girl who frequented Broadway.

"I need to reflect as well. Excessive illusions are close to ignorance. It's like thinking Okinawans eat 'sata andagi' every day."

"Oh, no, they do. Grandmas make them every day."

To Ms. Kyoko, who was saying things that only fueled the fantasy about grandmothers, Officer Rivaldi retorted persistently, "Even so, you weren't a hundred percent sure you'd survive, right?" He clung to the issue as persistently as the maple syrup clung to his pancakes—perhaps a sign of how worried he was.

For someone who always worked with a letter of resignation in her heart, it was hard to reach him.

"Did you simply assume that one pill wouldn't kill you? But there was still a possibility of suffering lasting internal damage. You might say that's fine, but what if a child decided to imitate you? Adults have a responsibility to set a good example. You can't just prioritize your own well-being."

"I sincerely apologize for causing you concern. Yes, I won't deny that I felt a risk of about 0.4 percent, even if it wasn't a significant one—honestly, when I heard the whole story just now, I felt the blood drain from my face. I thought my hair might turn white."

Ms. Kyoko’s "sincere apology" was as light as one might expect from someone who would forget today’s events by tomorrow, but instead of bowing her head, she pulled up her left sleeve.

There was a bilingual identification, meaningful only to her, written there—she had confirmed it upon waking, the only written information she carried with her, even into her bedroom, a constant reminder checked every morning. It was like a label on a medicine bottle, but clearly handwritten.

I am Kyoko Okitegami. Detective.

"Even if the pill had a fifty-fifty chance of being poison, I probably would have taken it. It’s not an easy choice by any means, and I don’t have the resolve of Randyl Rascuette, who died on stage, but still, there’s an old version of me, long forgotten by everyone, who decided to make a living in this field."

'Even if it means working behind the scenes, away from the spotlight.

This is my Broadway.'

With those lines, the master detective brought the curtain down on the case.

10

The Forgetful Detective might have closed the curtain on the case, but for the NYPD, the show wasn't over yet. Their job wasn't simply to serve as human alarm clocks; wrapping up a tragicomedy wasn't that simple. Even if they managed to prevent any more victims, the case wouldn’t truly be over until they identified the mastermind behind it all.

In the midst of this chaos, Officer Casteiz received a call from FBI Agent White Birch—it was a remote video call since he was currently stationed in Washington, D.C.

She braced herself, thinking it was about the 'HYORO-GAN' clinical trial, now deemed a federal crime, but to her surprise, what he wanted was an update on the Forgetful Detective’s recent activities.

Though she didn’t know the details and wasn’t particularly eager to find out, he was apparently the one who had provided the Forgetful Detective, who could no longer stay in Japan, with an address on Manhattan Island as a form of protection—though it seemed unbelievable, that small, golden-haired, golden-eyed man claimed that his only mission at the FBI was to protect Kyoko Okitegami.

Officer Casteiz felt as though the Forgetful Detective, a dangerous substance in her own right, was being used in a reckless experiment to see if she would work in America. If this was a form

of witness protection for a refugee, they should at least guarantee her a proper identity, not just stick her in an old, run-down apartment…

"No, no, she's like a lotus flower blooming in the wild. That's what we say in Japan. The Forgetful Detective is enjoying New York to the fullest, being treated to steaks and pancakes by top-notch officers like you. There's no need for me to do anything."

"If that's what you think, then why don't you have the FBI cover the expenses? Even if it's out of your own pocket, that would be fine."

"While I appreciate the offer, I'll have to decline. There's a certain significance in her using her skills to earn her keep, even if it means relying on your generosity."

'But there was a risky statement this time,' Birch said, smiling faintly on the screen and then turning his expression serious—a risky statement? The problematic kind that would make Officer Rivaldi frown? Though really, there was nothing said in front of him that didn't seem problematic.

"You know, she said something at the end that sounded like she was praising Randyl Rascuette's death, didn't she? To be honest, that's a dangerous sign. I have no choice but to raise the alert level."

Praising? Did she say that?

Ah, yes, she did just report to Agent Birch that Ms. Kyoko said something like, "I don't have the resolve of Randyl Rascuette, who died on stage," while eating pancakes—but that wasn't exactly "praising." It was more like paying respect to the deceased, or at most, "mourning."

However, now that she thought about it, even though there were four known victims of the clinical trial, it was a bit odd that she had deliberately mentioned only the first one to be discovered—was it important that she "died on stage"? Was it because, as a working woman in New York, she felt a sense of shared professional dedication…? A sort of empathy.

"No, that's not it, Assistant Officer Casteiz. If we're talking about professional dedication, there are probably producers who would find it extremely inconvenient for someone to die on stage. Then again, I don't like to get so obsessed with the finer details. For example, in Japan, you have these elaborate 'BENTO' boxes called 'jubako,' but that's not my cup of tea. I'm more of a 'magewappa' kind of guy, preferring the simplicity of a bentwood box over extravagance. Above all, I want to respect your investigation—I have no intention of intervening. But didn't you find it strange? That 'HYORO-GAN' was detected in the stomach of Randyl, who died of malnutrition?"

"Huh? What do you mean? I don't understand at all."

If Randyl Rascuette had fallen into malnutrition due to the placebo effect of the "HYORO-GAN," then it would be perfectly reasonable for it to be detected—but no similar substance was detected in the bodies of the other three victims.

That's right. Of course.

She really didn't understand at all.

After all, whether it was a placebo or a real drug, it only worked when it was absorbed and digested—if any drug wasn't digested, it wouldn't be absorbed into the body. That's why Ms. Kyoko had taken an hour as a margin for her nap, something the officer had just reported to Agent Birch.

"Exactly. In Japan, they say, 'If you sleep right after eating, you'll turn into a cow.'"

Japan certainly had a proverb for everything.

Was it a metaphor for rumination?—Anyway, that made it seem like Randyl Rascuette died right after taking the "HYORO-GAN." That's why at first, a fast-acting poison like cyanide was suspected—if she had taken the "HYORO-GAN" to suppress the unbearable hunger before going on stage, it wouldn't make sense for it to remain undigested.

Or would it?

Even if it was found as a residue, it was originally a placebo with no real effect.

"The tricky thing about the placebo effect is that even if you know about it, it can still happen precisely because you know. Even if a patient knows the drug won't work, the placebo effect might still kick in. In Japan, they say, 'even a pilchard's head can be revered through faith.'"

"So you're saying that sometimes people want to be deceived? And that Randyl Rascuette was one of them?"

"No, it's the opposite. When she collapsed from malnutrition on the stage of her beloved dream, she realized she had been deceived—that's why, just before she died, she swallowed the 'HYORO-GAN' she had hidden in her stage costume like a charm."

He spoke as if he had seen it happen, but up to the point where she 'hid it in her stage costume,' it was plausible. How a secret medicine, which she was told she didn't have to take if she felt unwell, was stored—or ultimately where she hid it—was a task given to the participants, and keeping it always by her side was undoubtedly one possible answer.

But what kind of state of mind would make someone, in their dying moments, use their last bit of strength to swallow it? What psychological basis would that have?

"It wasn't just because she was hungry and delirious, right?"

"It was an act of accusation. If the mysterious pill, which could have been overlooked as just a piece of dirt if found in her costume, was discovered in her stomach, it would likely be analyzed and investigated—indeed, it was, and the wicked conspiracy was uncovered. In other words, Kyoko Okitegami praised such a noble act of self-sacrifice, where the victim used her own stomach as a pill case."

She was left speechless.

As a member of the NYPD, she'd like to argue that the investigation would have been conducted even if the pill had been found in her costume, but she couldn't deny that the discovery of "HYORO-GAN" in her body during the autopsy drew the attention of the investigation team—without those autopsy results, who knew if they would have been able to link the note left among her belongings to the case.

No, but still, such a physically and even fatally risky dying message was nothing more than Agent Birch's interpretation.

"Exactly. And even if it weren't, it's just the Forgetful Detective's deduction—in reality, it's likely that she collapsed on stage, disoriented from malnutrition, and just tried to fill her stomach with the pill in her confused state. But the truth doesn't matter. What matters to me is that Kyoko Okitegami, after hearing the case details from you, must have seen this act of self-sacrifice and decided to take that risky pill herself."

So empathy—huh?

She projected herself onto a minor dancer she never even met—maybe, then, on her first day, she hadn't stood on the Broadway stage out of some shallow fan-like sentiment.

While Officer Casteiz couldn't dismiss the possibility of a deeper meaning, the truth remained elusive.

Of course, the inner thoughts of the deceased Randyl Rascuette were 'forever silent,' and what Ms. Kyoko had thought of her death, or what she had felt about it, were now lost to the mists of time.

When it came to Ms. Kyoko, she had completely forgotten the victim's death, and her feelings at that time—just as she had forgotten the smell of the steak and the taste of the pancakes she once ate with the officers.

"At any rate, when working with the Forgetful Detective in joint investigations from now on, be careful not to let her be drawn into any self-sacrificing deaths. She may have been a global threat once, but that doesn't mean we want her dead."

"Huh—?"

She had been a global threat?

The idea of conducting joint investigations with such a threat, as if it were a given, was baffling... The policewoman was tempted to feign a technical difficulty and end the video call.

No, she should follow Ms. Kyoko's lead and just go along with it for now.

The assassination squad "SHINOBI" must be almost out of tricks by now—sure, the officers had been caught off guard when an unfamiliar "SHURIKEN" appeared in Central Park, but after dealing with the "KUSARIGAMA" on Liberty Island and the "HYORO-GAN" on Broadway, they were getting used to it. New York was quite adept at absorbing foreign cultures, after all.

What was next, "MAKIMONO" on Fifth Avenue?

In that sense, the placebo effect of the assassination squad "SHINOBI" within the NYPD was starting to wear off—the spell of ninja techniques had been broken. If that was the case, the frequency with which Officer Casteiz visited the Forgetful Detective as a Japanese culture advisor would dramatically decrease—she had been both exasperated and charmed by the enigmatic illegal immigrant, so she couldn't deny a tinge of sadness at the thought. But that was the reality.

The reality of New York, a melting pot of cultures.

"—Well, then, yes, uh, if there's an opportunity. If a mysterious case arises, I might drop by the Okitegami Detective Agency's New York branch."

Officer Casteiz' understanding of Japanese culture, for better or worse, was beginning to grow on her. Agent Birch, hearing this rather positive response, replied with a serious expression instead.

"I have a feeling you'll be going there soon."

He made this ominous prediction, just as he had before.

"The truth is, some highly credible intel came into the FBI this morning. That's also why I contacted you—because it seems Officer Rivaldi doesn't like me."

"Not that I'm particularly fond of you either," she thought to herself, but she kept quiet—she was more concerned about this so-called highly credible intel. Quite an intriguing preamble.

"In thirteen hours from now, a troublesome man will land at JFK Airport—his arrival in New York is expected to cause unprecedented turmoil and chaos. Of course, the FBI will handle it, but we'll need the NYPD to act as well—especially if a curfew is imposed."

"A curfew…?"

That wasn't something the NYPD would handle; that sounded like a job for the military.

She thought it was a bad joke, but Agent Birch remained dead serious—what a rare sight for an FBI agent to have such an ill-fitting serious expression.

"It's almost as if the leader of the assassination squad 'SHINOBI,' so to speak, the 'TORYO,' is coming to America. Is the 'TORYO' coming from 'TOKYO'?"

"More than just a leader, he's a King. We've long referred to him by that code name within the FBI."

That was ridiculous. The only person who deserved to be called a King in this country was Elvis.

"The federal government wanted to deny him entry at all costs, but he's suspected of having already hijacked the plane he's on, and if that's the case, we can't avoid questioning him within the country. It's likely all part of his calculated flight plan."

Agent Birch, who had finally regained his smile, said this as if it were an extraordinary nuisance, but by then, it was Officer Casteiz who could no longer smile… Hijacking a plane just to enter the country, that was beyond disregarding the law. What did he think a border was?

Leaving the detective with a bewildered expression, Agent Birch added a further cryptic remark that only deepened the confusion: "By all means, please take good care of the Forgetful Detective. And when the time comes, make sure to rely on her," before ending the video call with the line,

"After all, he's the man who banished the Forgetful Detective from Japan—Yakusuke Kakushidate, the False Accusations King, with a full set of criminal charges. For his incognito visit, we must not forget to arrange a luxurious limousine with iron bars."

"Kyoko Okitegami's Hyoro-Gan" — Forgotten

第三話　掟上今日子の不忘術

Ch 3: Kyoko Okitegami’s Fubo Technique

1

When people hear the name New York, what tourist attractions come to mind? Perhaps Times Square would be the first to be mentioned. After all, the countdown that takes place there is broadcast worldwide on New Year’s Eve. Or maybe the Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree, which is also wonderful. There are plenty of fans who visit just to see the many shows held on Broadway. Everyone knows the Statue of Liberty with its raised torch, and even just strolling through the greenery of Central Park is enjoyable. Shopping on Fifth Avenue is fantastic, even if it's just window shopping. To deepen your cultural knowledge, you could spend your entire trip hopping between the many museums. Of course, you can also find joy in the food, whether it’s steak or pancakes. In short, what Assistant Officer Casteiz, who worked for the NYPD and hailed from California, wanted to say is that when people thought of New York, not a single one out of a hundred would immediately think of Niagara Falls.

Niagara Falls.

To be honest, she'd vaguely thought of it as a Canadian landmark. No, as someone who currently had an address in New York, she wasn't unaware that the state of New York bordered a neighboring country, but that was knowledge, not something she actually felt. It wasn’t something she had experienced or could relate to. Yes, she knew. She knew that Manhattan Island wasn’t all there was to New York. Her boss, Officer Rivaldi, had drilled that into her. He particularly despised the notion of urban arrogance.

That said, even Officer Rivaldi, this champion of human rights, was visiting Niagara Falls—and the border with Canada—for the first time. Well, of course, both Officer Rivaldi and Officer Casteiz were officers with the New York City *Police*. They were overwhelmed with daily work (how could the Homicide Division be overwhelmed, though?), and they had no time for leisure tourism. If Officer Rivaldi were truly a champion of human rights, she would sincerely wish he would first improve their workplace environment.

Especially lately.

Lately, they had been troubled by a mysterious illegal immigrant from Japan—and the situation had only worsened, leading the two of them to make this long journey to Niagara Falls, which was, in fact, related to that illegal immigrant.

Talking about illegal immigration near the border made anyone cautious, even without a strict boss, but when it came to the border with Canada, particularly at Niagara Falls, it was one of the most relaxed borders in the world.

Even the EU felt a bit stricter than this. Well, passports were still required, there was immigration control, there was customs, and you even had to pay a toll, so it was still a bona fide border. But it didn't seem like the kind of place where you heard much about the calm and not- so-calm topic of illegal immigration.

Even if Niagara Falls wasn't the first scenic spot that came to mind when thinking of New York, from another perspective, it was a landmark that stood on its own, much like the Grand Canyon, attracting over ten million tourists annually who cross that border—so in that sense, what was happening right now was an anomaly.

It wasn't the kind of case that should be handled by just two officers dispatched from the NYPD... after all, the border had been temporarily closed.

There hadn't been any friction between the two countries. The idea of America and Canada going to war was more apocalyptic than any other possible conflict between nations, but that wasn't what was happening now.

What had happened was a murder.

And so, the border had been closed... in accordance with the basic principle of preserving the crime scene.

If you heard that a murder occurred near the border, even someone with no knowledge of geopolitics could predict that the investigation would be extremely complicated.

But what if the murder occurred right on the border?

What if a murder occurred on a bridge spanning the Niagara River, which separated the United States and Canada, specifically New York State and Ontario?

What if, on that bridge, sandwiched between immigration controls, not technically belonging to either country under international law, yet crowded with tourists, a murder victim's body was 'discovered'? And what if, to make matters worse, the first person to discover the body was an illegal immigrant from Japan? That would be a catastrophe.

And if that person had white hair and wore glasses, it would be the worst.

2

"Nice to meet you. I'm Kyoko Okitegami, a detective."

Normally, this greeting would be heard in a room of an old, decrepit apartment in a block of Manhattan, but today, it was being spoken in an interrogation room of the Niagara Parks

Police... The officer had known the Forgetful Detective for a long time now, and she thought nothing could surprise her anymore, but even she didn’t see this coming.

For Officer Rivaldi, who never felt comfortable with their rather casual relationship with this illegal immigrant from Japan, perhaps this was something that was bound to happen sooner or later... Still, the fact that they managed to bring her back to this side of the border was all thanks to the efforts of this stubborn human rights advocate.

His hard work was immeasurable.

"I see. Thank you very much for your help. I heard Niagara Falls looks more picturesque from the Canadian side, but well, it’s quite charming to see from the American side too, isn’t it?"

Despite being in a situation that could easily escalate into a serious international incident, Ms. Kyoko smiled and said something as if she were just an ordinary tourist.

They had interacted with her as a Japanese culture advisor until now, but at this point, she was less of an illegal immigrant and more of an assassin sent from Japan. To think that she could cause a partial, albeit temporary, closure of the US-Canada border was unimaginable.

An assassin.

Or perhaps... "SHINOBI."

But it was simply their bad luck which had gotten them involved with her. As 'associates' of the first person who found the body, who didn’t even have a passport, let alone any form of ID, they were summoned all the way here... Although they hadn’t confirmed it yet, it’s probably the doing of FBI Agent White Birch. Even that small man with blonde hair and golden eyes likely didn’t anticipate such a bizarre situation, but still, he worked quickly.

"Let me get straight to the point, Kyoko-san."

Officer Rivaldi began, clearly not happy about it. He had treated Ms. Kyoko as a suspect in several murder cases before, but this time, it seemed like he was finally going to have to bring the hammer down on her, and perhaps he had some mixed feelings about it.

Or maybe he was just annoyed.

"Why were you, someone who lives in Manhattan, on that bridge? I’d like you to explain in detail how you became the first to discover the body. Of course, you have the right to remain silent if that testimony would be disadvantageous to you. You can also call a lawyer if you wish."

"I’m not good at keeping silent, you see. I love to chat... And if I called a lawyer, there wouldn’t be any place for a master detective to step in."

Even in an unfamiliar interrogation room, Ms. Kyoko's demeanor was no different from when she was in her own apartment... But for the Forgetful Detective, whose memory reset every day, there was no such thing as a ‘familiar’ place, and no one she had met before. There was no point in being attached to your home or your country.

Officer Casteiz had mixed feelings about the fact that someone he had developed a relationship with, however slight, had caused a major incident, or at least was involved in one, but this feeling was one-sided. To Ms. Kyoko, the two officers visiting her now were unmistakably new acquaintances.

That fact was both sad and infuriating.

But well, even setting aside such personal peculiarities, this person seemed to be inherently unfazed by either the interrogation room or the interrogation itself...

"Isn't it sightseeing, Officer Rivaldi?"

Ms. Kyoko said this, for some reason phrasing it as a question.

It was a tone that could only be described as irritating.

"I don’t remember why I’m staying here, but since I’m living in New York, I couldn’t pass up the chance to see Niagara Falls, one of the world’s three great waterfalls. Incidentally, the three great waterfalls in Japan are Kamakura, Muromachi, and Edo."

She chuckled softly.

It seemed to be some sort of joke involving Japanese culture, but it was probably the kind that only made sense in Japanese, so it didn’t quite land. Though, to be fair, a joke that landed in an interrogation room would be problematic in itself.

*TL Note: more precisely, it's a pun based on "waterfalls" and "shogunates" both reading as "bakufu"

Even so, from what she recalled of Ms. Kyoko’s morning routine, it was supposed to involve strolling through Central Park (where a murder had occurred, marking the beginning of the relationship between the master detective and the NYPD), so this was quite a sudden and distant excursion.

Had there been any reason for her to go on a sightseeing trip so far away?

Perhaps she had read an article about Niagara Falls in the newspaper. That was another one of Ms. Kyoko's morning routines... Otherwise, it was unlikely that someone would suddenly decide to trek all the way to Niagara right after waking up.

To be serious, if Ms. Kyoko, who was an illegal immigrant from Japan and was under the distant protection of the FBI, had crossed that bridge over the Niagara River, wouldn't that have been a major issue all by itself? Even though the border was relatively relaxed, the question of how she got past immigration without a passport would be a matter of national importance, possibly even more so than a murder case.

"Speaking of which, I hear that bridge is called the Rainbow Bridge. There's actually a Rainbow Bridge in Japan too, but in Japan, it's illuminated in rainbow colors with lights. It's not like here, where the dynamic mist from the large waterfall creates a real rainbow. No rain, no rainbow, as they say."

"Huh... Is that so?"

Even in a situation like this, she was still a Japanese culture advisor.

"No rain, no rainbow" was a Hawaiian proverb, but then again, Hawaii was also a state with many Japanese tourists. Not that Officer Casteiz even knew the bridge was called the Rainbow Bridge... It felt like they were being given a tour by a tourist. In an interrogation room.

Come to think of it, this interrogation room was unfamiliar to them as well. She wouldn't go so far as to call it an away game, but they certainly weren't in their element.

"Incidentally, there's also a waterfall in Kyushu that's called the 'Niagara of Japan.' It's called Harajiri Falls. The waterfall appears suddenly, right next to the road, and it always surprises those who see it."

How could this person maintain her own pace even in such a situation...? It made the policewoman feel like she was worrying for nothing. Not that she was particularly worried in the first place.

"Speaking of waterfalls, I saw a lot of them on Iriomote Island. Or rather, I saw them in the mountains. I even walked through one; it left quite an impression."

Officer Rivaldi, who had military experience in Okinawa, said this, seemingly influenced by Ms. Kyoko... Clearly, he wasn't quite himself today.

They should be asking the necessary questions as soon as possible, but she couldn't deny that there was a part of herself that was afraid to know the truth.

"*Giggle*. But even so, Niagara Falls was truly overwhelming. That dynamism was quintessentially American. It was worth the trip. I don't think I'll ever forget this sight, at least not today."

When someone went so far as to describe it as quintessentially American, it really stirred one's patriotism. Though Officer Casteiz had thought it was a Canadian landmark... Speaking of which, wasn't there an American Falls and a Canadian Falls, both part of Niagara Falls?

"Strictly speaking, there's also Bridal Veil Falls. But yes, the image of Niagara Falls that we Japanese have is probably of the Canadian Falls... of Horseshoe Falls, to be exact."

The Japanese culture advisor added, "It's like the difference between viewing Mount Fuji from Shizuoka Prefecture or Yamanashi Prefecture."

"In any case, it's good to go out once in a while. I'm not sure how often 'once in a while' is, but I made quite a few new discoveries, not just at Niagara Falls."

"That doesn't mean you had to discover a murder victim, Kyoko-san."

Perhaps having steeled himself, Officer Rivaldi rather forcefully brought the conversation back to the main topic. Rivaldi, who disliked turf wars, wasn't trying to compete with the Niagara Parks Police, but letting an important person of interest wriggle out of questioning would be a disgrace to the NYPD.

"What exactly were you doing on the Rainbow Bridge? Tell us before you forget. We might still be able to help."

Could they?

It felt like it was already too late... When borders were involved, not even the FBI might be able to fully protect Ms. Kyoko. Who knew what kind of arrangements that small man was making as they spoke. By sending them, he might be buying time...

"If you ask what I was doing, I was simply administering first aid. Everyone was so mesmerized by the falls that they didn't even notice someone had collapsed. I came here for that very purpose, so I can understand the feeling."

"First aid...?"

"Yes. There's something called the bystander effect, where in a crowded place like that, people who collapse are often ignored. But I couldn't just leave someone in need, which is why I became a detective. I aspired to be a master detective to save as many people as possible."

The things she said, that money-grubber.

Or maybe it was because she had forgotten her original noble intentions that she now demanded such exorbitant fees from the NYPD.

But it was also intriguing. What was the real reason this mysterious Japanese woman was working as a detective? Given the strict confidentiality required in her profession, her trait of having her memory reset every day and forgetting the cases she had worked on was certainly suited for a detective, but if that was the case, she could have been a lawyer too.

She could have defended herself right now.

"Unfortunately, though, it was already too late. I regret that I ended up breaking the deceased's ribs for no reason."

It seems she had performed some fairly vigorous chest compressions. While that was certainly an appropriate measure, it might not have appeared that way to the surrounding tourists or the immigration officers.

It wasn't quite corpse mutilation, but...

"By the way, you two from the NYPD. You casually mentioned ‘murder victim,’ but what was the cause of death? I couldn’t determine it with her clothes on."

She talked like a doctor. Doctors were also bound by confidentiality... but she made it sound as if she could have done something if she had known the cause of death.

Was the white of her hair the same white as a doctor's coat?

"Right now, she’s with the coroner. And, well, it’s not yet certain that it was a murder."

Officer Rivaldi reluctantly admitted.

He was a sharp detective, unmatched in catching careless remarks, but the master detective wasn’t one to be outdone. Even if she didn’t surpass him, she was right on his heels. If this were a mystery novel, this would be the scene where Rivaldi, having let slip the term ‘murder victim’ before the cause of death was determined, would be marked as the true culprit.

That said, Officer Rivaldi hadn’t made that statement carelessly... There was enough evidence, even to an amateur’s eye, to suggest foul play on the body of the victim (regardless of whether she was a victim or not being still undetermined).

Underneath her clothes.

"I see, I see. By the way, which direction was she trying to cross the Rainbow Bridge? From which Niagara to which Niagara?"

At this point, it was hard to tell who was interrogating whom.

While she would evade their direct questions with skillful dodges, she would strike back with her own questions, cutting straight to the point. What an unfair line of questioning.

"That too is currently under investigation. Her wallet, phone, and other valuables seem to have been stolen, so she didn't have anything on her, making it difficult to identify her at this time. But... I suspect she was trying to cross from Canada to the US."

Officer Rivaldi deduced this because, in any case, if she was on the Rainbow Bridge, she must have passed through one of the countries' immigration controls, and if so, there should be a record of it... The fact that nothing has been uncovered on the US side suggested a high possibility that she passed through Canadian immigration.

If the fact that the FBI and NYPD strong-armed the prime suspect across the border to this side was making international investigative cooperation difficult, that would be unfortunate. However, once it was clarified, the Canadian immigration authorities should inform them soon enough.

About the victim's name, address, and nationality.

"In other words, at this point, we don't even know who this person is. From what I could tell, she appeared to be in her thirties, but that's uncertain too. Both America and Canada are multiethnic countries, so it's hard to say definitively, but at any rate, it doesn't seem like she was a Japanese tourist."

If a Japanese person said so, that might be the case.

Incidentally, the reason Officer Rivaldi's manner of speaking was somewhat vague was because it still remained unclear how this Japanese tourist, or rather, illegal immigrant from Japan, had managed to slip through American immigration without a passport.

If this illegal immigrant from Japan was also trying to cross illegally into Canada, then it was no longer just an issue between two countries but an international problem involving three nations.

Officer Casteiz had been worried that they might have to arrest this brazen yet endearing Forgetful Detective someday, but she never imagined that the Niagara Parks Police, far away on the other side, would beat them to it.

Depending on the circumstances, she could have been taken into custody by the Niagara Parks Police across the border... although, she didn't know if it was called the Niagara Parks Police on

the Canadian side. Each state had a different police system even within the same country, let alone a different country.

"In order to maintain the excellent and smooth relations between our countries, a speedy resolution is necessary. And that's where I come in. The fastest detective. If it’s a national crisis, I won’t be greedy; I’ll discount my fee by one percent."

"Indeed, it would be quickest if you just confessed, Kyoko-san, but you didn’t know the victim, correct?"

Ignoring the detective agency chief's sales pitch, Officer Rivaldi pressed on and asked her. He was well aware that it was a meaningless question, because—

"Yes, it was our first meeting. Though, for me, everyone is a first meeting."

That was the whole idea.

"I don’t quite understand. If you were going to award me the National Honor Award for performing a lifesaving act across national borders, then I could accept it, but being treated as a suspect is a bit hard to swallow. Especially since it’s still unclear whether it was a murder or not. On what grounds am I being detained?"

There was no National Honor Award in America, and as for reasons to detain an illegal immigrant from Japan, there were probably a hundred they could list immediately, but what she was saying was reasonable.

At this point, they had no choice but to disclose the information.

The reason why everyone assumed that the unidentified body with an unknown cause of death was a murder victim... if Ms. Kyoko had removed ‘her’ clothes while performing CPR, she too would surely have reached the same conclusion.

"She was covered in wounds," Officer Casteiz said.

"Covered in wounds? You don't mean figuratively as in her past, do you?"

"No, physically. Her left arm was full of what appeared to be fresh cuts, likely from a blade. The wounds were so numerous that it was hard to look at."

"...So, in other words, are you saying there were signs of self-harm, like wrist-cutting? Do you think the victim had suicidal tendencies?"

Ms. Kyoko tilted her head as she went on.

With that quick-thinking, white-haired head of hers, was she perhaps deducing that the victim had come to the border intending to jump off the Rainbow Bridge? Officer Casteiz didn't have any concrete information on whether people tried to commit suicide at Niagara Falls, but personally, after seeing those great falls, she felt that it would actually make someone lose the will to die.

But fundamentally, that wasn't it.

"No, not the wrist. The entire arm. From the wrist to the shoulder—the entire arm... And they weren't deep cuts. They looked like the kind of scars you'd see on someone who had been subjected to persistent torture. I said fresh wounds, but there were old ones too."

It seemed there were signs that the victim had been tortured or abused over a long period. The wounds looked as if they were deliberately inflicted to be just deep enough to avoid needing stitches, which gave a very malicious impression, according to the medical examiner employed by the Niagara Parks Police.

Moreover, while the wounds on the left arm were particularly noticeable, they weren't the only ones. As the autopsy progressed, similar wounds were found scattered all over her body... The more the autopsy progressed, the more new wounds were discovered.

They might be finding new wounds even now.

A person with not just a stained background, but a body covered in scars, was found dead in an extraordinarily unusual location. It was impossible not to suspect foul play.

Of course, it was hard to imagine that a master detective who lived in Manhattan and previously operated in Japan could have inflicted those numerous scars over a long period. It was also unlikely that she could have inflicted them in that public place, on a clothed victim, under the watchful eyes of bystanders... but the fact that this strange detective, who shouldn't even have been there, was the one who first discovered the body was the basis for her detention.

So, at least for now, she hasn't been arrested. She was still being treated as a material witness. Though it might just be that the FBI agent was working hard to prevent an arrest warrant from being issued.

A strange crime scene, a strange corpse, a strange suspect.

Strange scars.

"..."

And then. At that moment, Ms. Kyoko fell silent.

The supposedly talkative detective, who would readily discard her right to remain silent without a second thought.

No... come to think of it, this was rare. The officer couldn't recall seeing this mysterious Japanese woman in deep thought very often... Not that she was thoughtless, but her usual style was to keep talking nonstop while thinking, no matter how absurd the situation she was faced with.

It was as if she was moving her brain before she even thought... Officer Casteiz thought that was the root behind her claim of being the fastest detective, so she was taken aback when the other was, so to speak, "normally" lost in thought like this.

Up until now, her maintaining her usual stance in a distant interrogation room was the strange part... but even the veteran Officer Rivaldi seemed at a loss on how to react. After a long, pensive silence, Ms. Kyoko finally began,

"Normally,"

She raised a finger.

"This would be the moment to argue that there's nothing strange about a master detective being at the scene of a strange case, and that it's just a matter of fate. In fact, if a murder occurred right on the border, and I were somewhere else entirely, it would mean I'm lacking in detective skills. If I weren't here today, despite living in New York State, I would need to consider retiring as a detective."

She was spouting some strange logic, but if it was supposed to be some kind of mystery story theory, the officer guessed she could just let it slide. The idea that detectives were the number one people you didn't want to travel with might be universal, regardless of culture.

However, Ms. Kyoko continued.

In a solemn tone, with no hint of a smile.

"But this time, there might be a reason beyond my being a detective that brought me to Niagara Falls. This is... yes, a dangerous sign."

A dangerous sign?

They had long since passed the stage of signs and were on the verge of an international incident, but was she saying this was still only a prelude?

"What do you mean, Kyoko-san? Are you saying you have an idea about the wounds that cover the victim's entire body?"

"Yes, I do."

Up until now, Ms. Kyoko had been deftly evading the sharp detective's questions, but suddenly, she admitted it.

Could this be a confession?

No, no, there was no way Ms. Kyoko had inflicted those wounds. Even disregarding the number of wounds and the fact that the victim's clothing were not disheveled, when Ms. Kyoko was detained on the bridge (by both countries), she didn't have so much as a paperclip on her, let alone a blade.

With no fake nails or anything, it was unlikely that she could physically harm someone... That was why, no matter how suspicious she seemed, she was still only a person of interest.

"Rather than saying I have an idea, it's more accurate to say that I do something similar. Of course, not wrist-cutting, but—"

As she spoke, Ms. Kyoko rolled up the left sleeve of her jacket. By now, both Officer Casteiz and Officer Rivaldi were familiar with it, but on her exposed skin, written in her own handwriting with a magic marker, it said in both Japanese and English:

"I am Kyoko Okitegami. 25 years old.

Detective.

Currently staying illegally in New York."

It was the only form of identification for the Forgetful Detective, who carried no passport or ID, and whose origin was unknown—a handwritten note. By now, the policewoman wasn't the least bit surprised that it boldly stated the other to be an illegal resident, but still, what of it?

Yes, it was on the same left arm, but Ms. Kyoko hadn't slashed that skin to shreds.

"Indeed, you could say it's not like the 'work' done on Edo-style sushi, where fine cuts are made."

This sudden insertion of a reference to Japanese culture could be a sign that she was gradually regaining her composure as she spoke.

Ms. Kyoko rolled her sleeve back down and said:

"However, I believe the meaning is the same. If my deduction is correct, the wounds on her left arm were carved by the victim herself—not as an act of self-harm, but as a mnemonic device."

"A mnemonic device?"

"Or perhaps it’s more like a ninja technique."

The memorization method used by the assassination group "SHINOBI."

It was the technique known as "FUBO."

3

The "FUBO" technique.

Officer Casteiz didn't expect a new ninja technique to emerge at this point—certainly, her connection with this eccentric detective had begun when a corpse was found in Central Park, murdered with a "SHURIKEN," of all things.

Since then, whenever a case arose involving any ninja tools, like "KUSARIGAMA" or "HYORO-GAN," supposedly used by the Eastern assassination group "SHINOBI," she would visit the Okitegami Detective Agency’s New York branch to consult Ms. Kyoko, the "Japanese culture advisor."

However, she thought that whole series of incidents had finally come to an end. She had assumed that all the ninja techniques and tools had been exhausted, but it seemed the depths of the Eastern assassination squad ran even deeper. It seemed that the exoticism of a foreign culture was not so easily fathomed.

A mnemonic device? A memorization method?

Would it translate as "NO-FORGET" in English?

The connection between those words and the wounds on the unidentified victim’s left arm was still unclear, but it seemed they were about to receive another lecture on ninja techniques from this illegal immigrant from Japan.

Moreover, unlike the previous "SHINOBI" topics, even Officer Rivaldi, who had experience living in Japan, seemed to be hearing the term "FUBO" for the first time.

Was it that obscure a term?

"Yes, that’s right, it’s not very common—it’s rare, rather than just minor. It’s not a visible item like shuriken or 'hyoro-gan'; it’s more like a 'how-to.'"

"…Like the technique of ‘BUNSHIN’, making a doppelganger?"

When Officer Rivaldi asked this, Ms. Kyoko stood up, replying, "I would be troubled if you expected something as eccentric as that."

Stood up?

From the interrogation room chair, without permission?

"What are you two dawdling for? Allow me, who shoulders the burden of Japan, to explain the ‘FUBO’ technique to you, so let’s head out immediately."

"Head out? Where to?"

"To Niagara Falls."

What was she talking about? The officer was already well aware of the detective's light-footedness and love of going out (she had dragged them all around Manhattan while cooperating on previous investigations), but they were already right there in Niagara Falls, they didn't need to go anywhere.

And what did she mean by shouldering the burden of Japan?

"No, I mean the Niagara Falls on the Canadian side. As I mentioned earlier, I was detained while crossing the Niagara River from the American side to the Canadian side, so in the end, I’ve only seen the falls from the American side. When explaining the ‘FUBO’ technique in detail, the positioning is crucial. Armchair detectives are all well and good, but there’s only so much you can learn from mere book knowledge."

She was making it sound plausible, but in summary, wasn’t she just saying she wanted to use the investigation as an excuse to sightsee the Canadian Falls, which she missed due to encountering the murder victim?

She had previously said the view from the American side was lovely, but how brazen could she be? In the end, she just wanted to see Canada... Though indeed, coming all the way to Niagara Falls City without seeing the great falls from the Canadian side would be a mistake, like dying without seeing Naples.

That being said, it was unclear whether they would even be able to go home in the first place. Not just the suspect, but the two detectives probably wouldn’t be able to return downstate today.

"That’s a problem. If this interrogation drags on much longer, I’ll get tired, and I’m already starting to feel drowsy. If I don’t move around and see something stimulating, I might just fall asleep at any moment."

"That would be a problem, Kyoko-san!"

Officer Rivaldi stood up—because he was forced to, not just to follow her lead. Interrogating a suspect without letting them sleep was inhumane and should never be done in this day and age, and even in the past too. However, the Forgetful Detective was a different story.

If she were allowed to sleep, even for a moment, Ms. Kyoko would lose all her memories up to this point. It’d be a reset. In other words, she’d forget the events that led to her being the first to discover the unidentified victim on the bridge—before she fell asleep, they had to extract as much information as possible.

Using her forgetful condition against her, essentially holding her memory hostage, she was gently extorting the NYPD… How audacious could this person be?

"What if you try asking someone else then? I’m sure there are other people knowledgeable about Japanese culture, and if you like, you could ask the many Japanese tourists who are likely visiting. There might be some who know the rare ‘FUBO’ technique. I’m sure they could explain it much better than a suspect like me."

"…Assistant Officer Casteiz."

Ignoring Ms. Kyoko’s seemingly humble but ultimately provocative remarks, Officer Rivaldi turned to his subordinate. He wasn't a boss who usually wore a pleasant expression, but the bitterness on his face at that moment was unparalleled. Since being appointed to work with the Forgetful Detective and acting as her liaison, the policewoman found myself wondering if she’d ever seen this man smile.

"Contact that FBI agent and arrange for some cooperation with the Canadian side. I’m going to have a pleasant meeting with the Niagara Parks Police."

After going through so much trouble, using every connection possible, to somehow bring the murder suspect across the border to this side, now they were going to escort this important witness to the other side? The veteran detective's face was a mask of frustration… but as a loyal subordinate, she knew well that this humanitarian officer would never twist an investigation for the sake of his own pride.

As for herself, the thought of having to contact that little FBI agent again was already weighing her down… but arranging that shouldn’t be too difficult. Agent White Birch generally respected Ms. Kyoko’s autonomy. Judging by his approach so far, even if the border was involved, that wouldn’t change.

"So, it seems we have a conclusion? Rest assured, as a master detective, I have no intention of betraying the expectations of the esteemed NYPD."

The officer thought she meant she wasn't planning to flee the country, but that wasn't it at all.

"Indeed, I'm a huge fan of 'Anne of Green Gables,' but I won't go so far as to extend my trip to Prince Edward Island, visit Green Gables, and drink raspberry cordial."

At this point, they might as well hand her over to the Canadian police.

4

"I write on my left arm the minimal information I absolutely cannot forget, but this act in itself isn't particularly noteworthy, is it? I'm sure both of you have, on the spur of the moment, jotted down a quick note on your palm or the back of your hand."

After going through a convoluted process that would rival the thickness of an English-English dictionary if described in detail, the two officers from the New York Police Department, who had succeeded in extraditing an illegal immigrant from Japan without a passport to a third country, were now standing at Table Rock Center on the Canadian side of Niagara Falls, gazing at the world-famous great falls.

The policewoman didn't want to see it under these circumstances, but it was undeniably breathtaking. It seemed like it could blow away any small worries. If possible, she wished it could blow away their bigger worries too.

Personally, Officer Casteiz still thought that this place couldn't be considered a suicide spot… although she did think that the zipline attraction that let you glide over the top of Niagara Falls was almost suicidal. But still, wrist-cutting and jumping off a cliff or drowning oneself were completely different in nature, even though they were both forms of suicide.

"I might jot down a shopping list, maybe. As a memo, so to speak... but I would never write important investigative information on the palm of my hand."

Officer Rivaldi, who seemed to have noticeably lost weight since yesterday, responded. His haggard appearance made Casteiz worry that he might just jump into the whirlpool beneath the falls… Though they didn't always see eye to eye, she sincerely hoped that the master detective would reward the officer's hard work. And if possible, she hoped the same for her own efforts too.

It was nerve-wracking to accompany this woman, who was like a super diplomat, on her journey across the border, which was not only extrajudicial but completely illegal.

The contact with the small FBI agent had gone smoothly, as expected, but she had been given a condition in exchange for taking the important witness, who didn't have a passport, out of the country… The thought of fulfilling that condition weighed heavily on her, but that was probably a matter for tomorrow.

Today's story was different.

For Ms. Kyoko, there is only today.

"Yes, that's true. I also make sure to hide this left arm covered with long sleeves, and if I were to write investigative information on my skin, I think I would encrypt it somehow."

Ms. Kyoko's voice, as she spoke, was somewhat hard to hear. Of course, that was because of the sound of the water, which fell more than fifty meters into the Niagara basin—if they didn't huddle close and raise their voices a bit, they wouldn't be able to have a conversation. Combined with the number of tourists, it felt almost like they were at a festival.

Rather, it seemed that this overwhelming noise cancellation effect was exactly what the master detective had intended. Though, judging by her innocent enjoyment of the sight before her, it was also likely that she was simply here for sightseeing. But it appeared she had chosen this location near the great falls on the other side of the border specifically for a confidential conversation amidst the din.

In other words, Ms. Kyoko had judged that a confidential conversation couldn't be had in an interrogation room back in their home country… It was ironic that a place filled with people and tourists from all over the world was being used for a confidential conversation, but it was a well-known fact that detectives loved irony.

"However, encryption comes with its own issues… For example, have you ever looked back at a note you scribbled down a long time ago, only to find that you have no idea what it means, even though you wrote it yourself?"

Of course, the officer had. All the time.

Sometimes when looking back at handwritten investigative notes, it's not just that she didn't understand them—she couldn't even read her own handwriting. Even for someone who wasn't a Forgetful Detective, human memory was uncertain and easily swayed. People didn't just forget things; they could also misremember, mix things up, or even fabricate memories. As someone who conducted interviews and interrogations, this was a truth she had come to realize painfully.

Even Ms. Kyoko's handwritten memos could lead to misinterpretations depending on the situation. It would take a considerable amount of humor and a sense of irony to wake up in the morning with "Currently staying illegally in New York" written on your left arm and take it at face value just because it was your own handwriting.

"Except in rare cases like mine, a memo is merely a trigger to revive a sleeping memory. It can't serve as a memory device on its own. Memories are originally meant to be etched into the brain. Or, perhaps, into the body."

After saying something that seemed to deny her own identity,

"In the end, it's not about knowledge, but experience,"

the Forgetful Detective continued.

"What you learn through experience is not forgotten. It's called procedural memory, isn't it? Just like how you don't forget how to ride a bicycle once you've learned it. Even if you suddenly suffer from amnesia one day, it's not like you'll forget how to take a single step."

Hmm.

Well, it was intuitively easy to understand.

Perhaps that's why she had brought them to this scenic spot to experience the great outdoors, rather than staying in an interrogation room… experiential learning.

If you compare cramming knowledge about Niagara Falls in Manhattan to actually feeling the roar and spray of the water here, it was true that the way it stuck in your memory would be completely different.

"That's interesting, but how does that relate to the 'FUBO' technique, Kyoko-san? I understand what you're saying, but still, people forget things when they forget. I've never forgotten my time serving in Okinawa, but if you ask me whether I remember everything down to the smallest detail, well, that's tough. It might be due to my age, though."

"Oh, my. And here I thought you were the same age as me," she said with an enigmatic smile (not that it was clear if Ms. Kyoko was really 'twenty-five' as her memo suggested).

"Of course, even experiential memory involves selection. It's only natural that stronger experiences are more likely to be remembered."

She continued.

"Yes, just like the waterfall on Iriomote Island that you mentioned had left an impression on you. For example, even this, one of the three greatest waterfalls in the world, might not leave a lasting memory if you just passively view it on a school trip or something. However, if you were to slip from this Table Rock and fall over the railing into the whirlpool below, that would be an unforgettable experience for life."

No, wouldn’t you die?

It was a clear and relatable example, but pointing out the obvious felt unnecessary. Falling into Niagara Falls would be a trauma so severe that your body might remember it even if you lost your memory. You might even become afraid of approaching water altogether.

In other words, psychological trauma—wait, trauma?

"If you remember something along with a strong emotion like awe, fear, or pain, it’s easier for the memory to stick. The reason why harsh Spartan-style training was appreciated in the past might be because such ‘effort’ leaves a lasting impression on the mind."

"I see where this is going. So what you’re saying, Kyoko-san, is that the ‘FUBO’ technique is… a form of experiential memory technique?"

In response to Officer Rivaldi’s cautious, probing question, Ms. Kyoko nodded and said, "Yes. And it’s an experience that involves pain."

"In other words, it’s a memory technique where you cut your own skin with a blade, and at the same time, memorize the necessary information along with the pain. In neurological terms, it’s the linking of information. From then on, every time you see the scar, the synapses connect, and you remember, ‘Ah, that was from that time.’"

"…So, you’re saying that the wounds on the victim’s arm… and the wounds all over her body, not just on her arm, were all self-inflicted?"

Not wrist-cutting, but self-inflicted.

Self-harm.

It was hard to believe. No, it wasn't that Officer Casteiz didn’t understand what Ms. Kyoko was saying. Even the policewoman, when she looked at the scars left from sports in her school days or from training at the police academy, could immediately recall the circumstances and how they were inflicted. There was never a time when she was puzzled, wondering what injury had caused the scar. She might even be able to remember what she was thinking at the time.

"Yes, that’s right. Of course, it’s not a foolproof memory technique, as there are rare cases like mine. For instance, even if I woke up with a mysterious bandage wrapped around my leg, I wouldn’t be able to remember how I got the injury… just as I have no recollection of the accusations against me."

She said it so nonchalantly.

That was why Ms. Kyoko had to leave concrete written memos for herself, but generally speaking, a memory technique that involved pain might be more deeply etched into the body and, by extension, into the brain than simply writing down brief information or leaving coded messages. The officer could acknowledge that.

But... wasn't it a bit too extreme?

The other had called it a secret technique, but it was clearly different from the previous "SHURIKEN" or "HYORO-GAN." It didn't require specialized skills or knowledge. Even if you didn't belong to the assassination group "SHINOBI," anyone could start practicing this simple memory technique as soon as they heard about it, even starting from tomorrow.

However, that simplicity was directly connected to its barbarity.

"Now, now, Assistant Officer Casteiz. It's not commendable to regard another country's culture as barbaric. Even if it's a custom that's hard for us to believe, if it's considered normal in Japan, we must show respect and honor it. Come to think of it, cramming-style rote learning is still the mainstream method of education over there, isn't it?"

Officer Rivaldi, chiding his subordinate for her slip of the tongue, was clearly frowning at the ninja technique as well. It didn't seem like he was truly accepting this other country's culture from the bottom of his heart.

Cramming-style rote learning, huh…

Certainly, it wouldn't be defined as cheating since the answers and formulas weren't directly written on the body, but if an examiner saw a student staring at their wounded arm during a test, they'd likely turn pale.

"Well, I doubt even the most dedicated examinees in my country would go so far as to use this memorization method to get into their desired university. If students were using the 'FUBO' technique, the world would be in a sorry state… or rather, it would be a return to a bygone era. It's a memory technique that's inherently tied to life-and-death situations. It's a memory technique conducted under the guidance of experts, so it's something that good children should never imitate—not even the smart ones."

Did that mean intelligence and memory were two different things?

The fact that the wounds were thin enough not to require stitches might be because the victim applied just enough pressure on herself when inflicting them—if that was the case, then the victim's death and the wounds all over her body were unrelated.

Were they? No, they were probably not.

There was something that the victim absolutely had to remember, something she could never forget, which she had to go to such lengths to engrave into her memory.

She was trying to cross the border holding onto a secret that couldn’t simply be written in a memo or saved as data—or perhaps a secret so vital that even encrypting it in a complex way wouldn’t suffice.

It couldn’t possibly be that she was just forgetful.

The fact that her identity was unknown only made this even more suspicious. The assumption that she was likely crossing from the Canadian side because there were no records of her with US immigration might have been naive.

She could understand now why Ms. Kyoko had shown such a rare reaction in the Niagara Parks Police interrogation room. The fact that the Forgetful Detective happened to discover the corpse of such a memory technique user—or a ninja, if you will—amongst so many people, regardless of the bystander effect or anything else, felt somehow fateful.

"Let me confirm something, Kyoko-san. Unlike the notes you usually write directly on your skin during your detective work, we can’t deduce at all what the victim was trying to remember from her wounds, can we?"

"That’s right. The scars engraved by the ‘FUBO’ technique only hold meaning to the person themselves. It’s not even a code, more of a sensation. You can’t really feel someone else’s pain, even if you’re told the story behind it, can you?"

When it comes to pain that belongs solely to the individual, it's not like deciphering a coded message. It might sound cold to say "someone else," but even the injuries of those closest to us are impossible to truly feel. Even if we believe we've felt their pain, even if we think we've empathized, it's just an illusion—empathy.

Empathy.

Ah, if that’s the case, could this be a very dangerous situation? They had been tricked into crossing the border by an important witness’s smooth talk… but during the "HYORO-GAN" case, there was something that FBI Agent White Birch had given Officer Casteiz a sharp warning about.

Of course, since the warning wasn't physically sharp, there was no pain to remember it by, so she had completely forgotten…

He had been told by the small, blond-haired, golden-eyed man to be very careful that Kyoko Okitegami wouldn’t get dragged into a self-sacrificial death like the victim’s.

Did the unidentified victim—well, at this point, it was unclear whether she was simply a "victim" or not—have any self-sacrificial elements? Yes. The act of engraving information into her skin was, literally, shaving away at herself. And for a woman to do that to her skin… though Officer Rivaldi would likely argue it was the same for a man.

And to die halfway across the border.

A death away from home unlike any other.

Ms. Kyoko, who continued performing life-saving measures until she was restrained—perhaps she had been drawn to the victim from that point onward—

"M-Ms. Kyoko!"

"Wah! What is it? What got into you?"

"You don’t have to shout so loudly, I can hear you just fine," Ms. Kyoko said, flinching and taking a step away from Officer Casteiz.

Rather than being drawn in, she was pulled away.

No, wait. The policewoman didn't mean to shout loud enough to be heard over the roar of Niagara Falls… Officer Rivaldi also looked puzzled. Damn it, why was she the one who had to be looked at like that?

"It's fine, you don't need to get so angry. I'll go back home with you two, I promise. Besides, I haven’t even said that we should stop by Whitehorse to see the northern lights yet, have I?"

So she was planning to make such a suggestion.

"Yet" being the key word.

This was no joke. According to Officer Casteiz' knowledge of geography, being from the West, Whitehorse was practically on the border with Alaska. Was the detective planning to return to the United States from that direction? Please don't cross the North American continent so casually.

Whitehorse…

It was a name similar to that of a certain FBI agent, but well, it was probably unrelated. It seemed like her usual playful banter. Maybe the policewoman was just being overly cautious, influenced by him.

She had ended up imagining something foolish—that Ms. Kyoko might be drawn in by the self-sacrificial victim and jump off this cliff. What she should really be worried about was the haggard Officer Rivaldi jumping in instead.

"I do think it would be rude to Canada if we didn’t at least have some lobster before heading back. So, shall we settle on a course of action for our investigation?"

Ms. Kyoko pointed both index fingers at Officer Rivaldi. It might have been a two-gun pose, but the seasoned detective only frowned at her familiarity and didn't return fire. He was a man with strong self-control.

Even when the detective, as if assuming the role of the lead investigator, said, "Let’s hear it, Kyoko-san," he remained calm. As a subordinate, she couldn't help but pray he wasn't just at his wit's end and giving up.

"If you have a plan, that is. Although, I'm not sure how far the NYPD Homicide Division can get involved if it's not even a murder."

"Oh dear, what are you saying? You’re not the type to worry about jurisdictional disputes, are you, Officer Rivaldi?"

She said that as if she knew him well, despite this being their ‘first meeting.’

Well, she wasn't wrong.

If that weren’t precisely the exact case, neither he nor his subordinate, Officer Casteiz, would have come all the way to Niagara Falls, even with the FBI pulling strings behind the scenes.

"If the victim was a courier of some kind of classified information, identifying her will likely be extremely difficult. Like me, she didn’t have any ID. Was it really just because she was robbed? So I wouldn’t recommend approaching the case from that angle… what we should focus on is the cause of death. I understand we’re waiting for the autopsy report, but I suggest that the body be dissected more thoroughly than usual. Unravel every single capillary, dig deep… I don’t think a professional medical examiner would overlook anything, but there’s no harm in being overly cautious. Depending on the results, different patterns will emerge in the stance we should take, but in any case, it looks like this will turn into a major operation."

'Looks like we'll be sweating buckets. Or waterfalls, as they say in Japan.'

5

She had said it as if it were some kind of catchphrase, but after illegally crossing the US-Canada border and reaching this conclusion, the officer couldn’t help but think they could have settled it in the interrogation room with a summary that boiled down to "Let’s wait for the

autopsy results." Officer Casteiz had already been made to break out in a cold sweat plenty during this job, but after that, Ms. Kyoko didn't make any more unreasonable demands. She limited the sightseeing to eating lobster and quietly returned over the Rainbow Bridge back to Niagara Parks Police.

Could it be that the detective thought of crossing the border as casually as crossing a pedestrian crosswalk on a quiet country road? Well, to be extreme about it, borders were nothing more than lines drawn arbitrarily by countries... On a global scale, all that existed there was just a grand river.

And so, Ms. Kyoko would be spending that night in the Niagara Parks Police jail... As much as Officer Rivaldi was a stickler for not letting investigations be swayed by pride or appearances, he couldn't just casually take an important witness back to Manhattan Island. He had to show some respect for the Niagara Parks Police... though they might actually be eager to get rid of this troublesome detective as soon as possible.

It could turn into a game of hot potato.

Regardless of where she spent the night, it was unavoidable that Ms. Kyoko's memory would reset. The Forgetful Detective who solved any case within a day was, conversely, not flexible when it came to investigations that spanned more than one day.

Well, considering that they'd already gotten as much information as they could from the key witness, including the matter of the "FUBO" technique, the policewoman would say they'd done the minimum required work as officers dispatched from the NYPD.

The rest was just waiting for the autopsy results at a hotel in Niagara Falls, as Ms. Kyoko suggested—if only that were the case, but that was the tough part of being a public servant.

There was a promise with the federal agent.

Well, more like a quid pro quo.

Over a remote call using a laptop borrowed from the Niagara Parks Police, the small blond-haired, golden-eyed man made the following demands in exchange for allowing the Forgetful Detective to cross the border:

"Agreed. I'll notify the Canadian government on my end. If she comes back within an hour, I'll arrange for her to skip the eTA process. But as a favor in return, Assistant Officer Casteiz, since you're in Niagara, why not visit one of the nearby Thousand Islands?"

"Huh?"

Thousand Islands?

No, she knew what that was. It was also in New York State. But it was definitely not something you could call ‘near’ Niagara Falls. She thought it was a group of islands floating in the St. Lawrence River, which flowed out of Lake Ontario, where the Niagara River flowed in—sure, it was closer than Manhattan Island, but it was not the kind of place you’d just drop by because ‘you’re in Niagara.’

To be honest, after coming this far, she was already so tired that she didn’t even want to stop by the convenience store near the hotel.

And now this guy was telling her to go even further north?

Of course, White Birch wasn’t suggesting that as a sightseeing trip as part of New York City Police’s overtime work benefits—sightseeing, in this case, would have been the illegal and foreign journey to Niagara Falls from the Canadian side.

"You’re sharp. Though, to be honest, I do want you, who’s been looking after Kyoko Okitegami, to enjoy life. Do you remember the story I told you about the King?"

"The King? Ah, yes—the crime lord who came to the US from Japan, right?"

Was he called the False Accusations King? Well, something along those lines.

She had heard he was a great villain who had supposedly "mastered" the Japanese criminal code. And yet, he had received no punishment, a terrifying criminal who transcended the law. If this were an American courtroom, one would assume he had hired a horde of skilled lawyers by spending a fortune, but apparently, things worked differently in Japan. The King always managed to secure an "unexpected truth" that led to his acquittal by requesting famous detectives to solve the case.

According to Officer Rivaldi, who was familiar with Japan, there was a custom in that country where people would run around in front of the courthouse holding a piece of Japanese paper inscribed with "Victory (I AM WINNER!)" ...She had thought it was a country that valued modesty, so that custom came as a surprise.

"What was it again? You even told me his name, didn’t you? Was it Yakkai Kakushidate—no, Yakusuke Kakushidate, right?"

"You’ve got a good memory, Assistant Officer Casteiz."

'As expected of someone who looks after the Forgetful Detective,' he added.

She held back the urge to say that should be his task... As if being the watchdog of a human rights-oriented Officer wasn't enough of a grueling task to keep submitting transfer requests over, she didn't need another role on top of that.

Now that would be as troublesome as that man's name.

"Yeah. His name itself is cursed. He's a truly detestable and heinous criminal. When he entered the country, the situation escalated to the point where the President was about to declare martial law. For reasons unknown, Yakusuke Kakushidate surrendered without resistance at JFK Airport, so we at the FBI were able to apprehend him peacefully and secretly."

"That's right. I remember."

It wasn't that she remembered because she had a good memory, but because she had been mobilized for that commotion.

She wasn't supposed to say this as a police officer, but she couldn't shake the feeling of anticlimax when such a major criminal—rumored to have hijacked a plane to enter the country—had surrendered so easily. Officer Rivaldi had said it was like the Japanese proverb, "A mountain in labor giving birth to a mouse" (as in 'much ado about nothing'), but she never thought she'd hear that name again here.

"What happened to him after that? I thought he had already been sent back to Japan."

"Unfortunately, negotiations with the Japanese government didn't go well. We ended up getting stuck with this notorious criminal. The extradition treaty isn't functioning properly. On the contrary, we've teamed up with the CIA and set up a task force to decide what to do with him. There were also various other procedures involved... to put it briefly, Yakusuke Kakushidate is currently in the Thousand Islands."

The story connected. An unpleasant connection.

If she showed her perceptiveness here, she might end up being strong-armed into doing something she didn't want to do, so Officer Casteiz feigned ignorance, saying only, "Oh, is that so?"

"Yes. We rented one of the islands and hastily constructed a prison just for him. You could call it a False Accusations Prison... We successfully incarcerated a historically unprecedented villain without going through the judicial process. The justification of national security allowed us to get away with a lot, but it was still a forceful decision, and now we're dealing with the aftermath. It's a real headache."

That seemed to be the reason why he couldn't rush over from Washington, D.C., even though Kyoko Okitegami was in a pinch.

"You’re wondering why we built a new prison just for him in the Thousand Islands, aren’t you, Assistant Officer Casteiz?"

"No, I didn’t say anything. I have no doubts about your judgment, Agent Birch."

"Your dedication to duty is commendable. To be honest, there was no need for it to be the Thousand Islands. We chose an isolated island because it’s easier to secure, like Alcatraz Prison, but ultimately, the goal was just to separate him from Kyoko Okitegami."

In other words, it seemed they were looking for a location as far from Manhattan Island as possible. Considering the position, it was indeed on the opposite side of New York State. Since he had been apprehended at JFK Airport, they must have scouted locations within the state, but if they’d had more time, the False Accusations Prison might have been built on the West Coast.

"Yes. If the budget had allowed, I would have liked to build a prison on a space station."

When he said budget, did he mean the national budget?

The scale was so grand that she couldn’t keep up.

"No, no, I need you to keep up. Or rather, I need you to go there yourself. To that False Accusations Prison. I want you to meet with Yakusuke Kakushidate."

"Sorry, the connection seems bad, I couldn’t hear you clearly. What did you say?"

"I want you to meet with Yakusuke Kakushidate."

When he repeated it so bluntly, there was no room for pretense. In reality, both the screen and the audio were extremely clear. The only thing unclear was the gloomy feeling in Officer Casteiz’ heart.

"This is an unexpected turn of events. I thought I had separated Yakusuke Kakushidate from Kyoko Okitegami as much as possible, but of all things, the Forgetful Detective goes sightseeing to Niagara Falls and, to top it off, gets involved in a murder case."

He said, "gets involved."

In other words, the FBI—or at least this agent—didn’t believe Ms. Kyoko was a murderer.

"We can’t let there be any chance of the famous detective and the False Accusations King coming into contact. I must have told you that Yakusuke Kakushidate is the man who banished Kyoko Okitegami from Japan, right?"

"Yes, I heard that. I didn't hear about the details, but... I get the picture. Most likely, one of the many famous detectives hired by this great criminal to secure his acquittal—one of the most important ones—was the Forgetful Detective, right?"

Damn, she shouldn't have let her perceptiveness show.

But she couldn't see any other connection between the criminal and the detective... Though Ms. Kyoko herself, being the Forgetful Detective, probably didn't remember such a history.

Conversely, you could say Yakusuke Kakushidate had exploited that confidentiality. Just how much of a criminal was he? Clearing his name of crimes, only to commit even more.

"That's right. As a result of continuously clearing the false charges against the False Accusations King, the Forgetful Detective could no longer stay in Japan. It's an extremely inappropriate relationship... But that relationship, which should have ended when we took her into protective custody, was on the verge of being rekindled by Yakusuke Kakushidate's arrival in the US. If such a partnership were to form on the American mainland, it wouldn't just be a national crisis, it would be a global crisis."

It sounded exaggerated, but White Birch himself didn't seem to think he was being either exaggerated or grandiose. Rather, he might be intentionally downplaying it, fearing the possibility of eavesdropping on the communication.

"I intended to prevent it beforehand. In Japan, there's a saying, 'An old flame can easily reignite'... Even if I had to drench it with all the water from Niagara Falls, I'd want to extinguish that flame. So, Assistant Officer Casteiz, I have no choice but to give you a special mission. Head to the False Accusations Prison in the Thousand Islands and uncover the intentions of the False Accusations King. It's possible that the murder on the Rainbow Bridge was also his doing."

"Uh... That's a bit far-fetched."

Meeting with the False Accusations King was already far-fetched, but the idea that he could have committed a murder at Niagara Falls while locked up in a prison modeled after Alcatraz was equally absurd. To go over it again, just because it was closer than Manhattan Island didn't mean that Niagara Falls and the Thousand Islands were within walking distance. It was the kind of distance where a wealthy person might consider using a private jet.

"That's impossible. Are you saying he'd commit a murder at the border and cause an international incident spanning three countries, all without stepping foot outside the prison, just to call a detective?"

"That's the kind of man Yakusuke Kakushidate is. He wouldn't hesitate to start a war just to call a detective."

Could he be a war criminal as well?

If that was the case, she'd rather avoid meeting such a person, such a monster, at all costs... Besides, this didn't seem like something that should be the NYPD's responsibility. Why should she, near the Canadian border, be ordered by the federal government to meet with a major Japanese criminal?

"The fact is, he's already been sentenced to death in five states. Including one which had already abolished the death penalty. Even as we're having this remote conversation, the King is exhaustively sweeping through the laws of every state in America. If the Forgetful Detective's strength is exhaustive deduction, then the False Accusations King is engaging in exhaustive crime. If we were to go through the proper judicial process, the ice in Antarctica would melt first. No, it's highly possible that global warming itself is his crime alone."

On a global scale?

She thought White Birch was joking when he suggested that Yakusuke Kakushidate was somehow responsible for the sins of all humanity, but the agent was entirely serious.

Unlike the ice in Antarctica, the air turned frigid.

In any case, Officer Casteiz did have a sense of patriotism. Hearing that all the laws in America were being swept away, and that the entire world's population was being held hostage, she couldn't help but comply with the request, even if it was unreasonable.

Besides, to be honest, she was also curious.

Though she genuinely didn't want to meet him, as someone who regularly dealt with all sorts of criminals in New York, she couldn't say that she was completely uninterested in meeting someone of such a scale, someone who warranted an entire island being turned into a prison just for him. What kind of person could he be?

"Let me confirm. All I have to do is meet with the False Accusations King, Yakusuke Kakushidate, and determine whether he was involved in the incident on the Rainbow Bridge, right? I'm not being asked to mediate between him and Ms. Kyoko, correct?"

"Yes, mediation is out of the question. However, as usual, he'll probably deny any involvement in the murder. That's to be expected... Yakusuke Kakushidate is an alchemist who turns all crimes into false accusations. Like King Midas, who turned everything he touched into gold, he neutralizes every law he encounters."

Neutralization.

No, you could call that lawlessness.

"Should I be armed? I'd appreciate permission to use my gun if I feel my life is in danger."

"I'd like to say there's no need, but it's better to be cautious. Taking a visitor hostage for an escape is likely one of the most basic tricks in Yakusuke Kakushidate's criminal repertoire. I wish you luck, Assistant Officer Casteiz. Don't worry about preventing wars, saving the world, or rescuing the planet—just focus on helping the Forgetful Detective."

'Just like with the Canadian government, I'll make sure the False Accusations Prison is informed, so you should be good to go.'

Agent Birch said that quickly and abruptly ended the remote communication. Though it was a hurried affair, she wondered if it was because he was that busy—or perhaps there was something inconvenient he didn't want her to ask about.

She felt a sense of duty, but at the same time, she couldn't shake the feeling that she'd drawn the short straw. She even thought, at that moment, of defecting to Canada herself instead of Ms. Kyoko.

6

In the end, although Officer Casteiz did take Ms. Kyoko to the Canadian side, the policewoman didn't attempt to flee the United States. Despite seriously considering it due to the complexity of the situation, she figured it would be irresponsible to Officer Rivaldi, and there was also the matter of preventing Ms. Kyoko's suicidal thoughts.

It wasn't that she had such strong feelings for the white-haired detective that she felt she must protect the other at the cost of her own life, and for that matter, no matter how much time passed, Officer Casteiz would never be anything more than a 'first-time acquaintance' to Ms. Kyoko. But seeing that very same Ms. Kyoko being pulled towards a victim's 'sacrificial death,' she couldn't be so heartless as to just stand by and do nothing.

She'd go meet the False Accusations King.

Surely he wouldn't eat her alive.

After thinking it over, she decided not to go armed. Any dangerous items would probably be confiscated upon entering the island anyway, and if that was the case, she figured it would be better to approach the criminal with an open mind rather than awkwardly borrowing a bulletproof vest from the Niagara Parks Police.

She decided to take a page from Ms. Kyoko's welcoming stance of opening her office door without even a chain lock for anyone. If she read too much into it, that might actually be a

technique for getting inside the visitor’s guard as quickly as possible... After returning from Canada and arriving at the hotel, she had no choice but to report to Officer Rivaldi about the quid pro quo. Although she hadn’t been specifically asked to keep it a secret, it was, after all, an under-the-table deal with an FBI agent, so it was a report she was very reluctant to make.

"I remember the False Accusations King well too. We were mobilized together, Assistant Officer Casteiz. Well, if you ask Kyoko-san, she’d probably say that’s a ‘participatory’ memory... Hmm. Should I go with you?"

"No, I’ve been told to go alone."

Although he must have been exhausted from negotiating with the Niagara Parks Police, his consideration was so appreciated that she was almost tempted to take him up on it, but she was already grateful enough that he didn’t scold her for the under-the-table deal. Besides, this was also her way of managing risks.

If, during the meeting with the False Accusations King, something were to happen to her—in her gut, it felt more like a fifty-fifty chance rather than a remote possibility—it would be better for Ms. Kyoko to have a police officer who knew her well by her side.

Though their relationship was somewhat adversarial, the capable detective from the NYPD at least understood the peculiar circumstances of the Forgetful Detective.

"Just in case, I've written a will. If anything happens to me, could you deliver it to my parents in California?"

"Understood."

It was reassuring to receive such a quick and affirmative response. If only the transfer requests she kept submitting to HR could be accepted that smoothly. Meeting with the False Accusations King was no easy task, but it wasn't as difficult as delivering news of a subordinate’s death to their family, which made her feel a bit more at ease.

"By the way, Officer Rivaldi, were you able to get the results of the autopsy from the Niagara Parks Police?"

"Ah, that. When I conveyed Kyoko-san’s advice, it seems their medical examiner was convinced, particularly regarding the wounds on the victim’s body, especially the left arm. Although, to be honest, they were quite skeptical..."

Well, of course they were.

Even if you told them it was a technique called ‘FUBO’ used by the Japanese assassination group ‘SHINOBI,’ no doctor was going to simply say, ‘I see, that makes sense.’ If Officer Rivaldi hadn’t intervened to 'translate,' it could have easily sparked prejudice against Eastern practices.

"Not that it's a trade-off, but they did share some information. While nothing is confirmed yet, it seems like it might have been poisoning."

"Poisoning...?"

It reminded her of the previous ‘HYORO-GAN’ case.

No, for that matter, even the ‘SHURIKEN’ case, which was the first time she had teamed up with the Forgetful Detective, involved a lethal poison—an Oriental poison, if she recalled correctly.

"They're still working on identifying the type of poison and how it was administered, but if the wounds on the body were self-inflicted, then they wouldn’t have caused the death."

"Does this mean Ms. Kyoko will be cleared of suspicion?"

"Given that she ran to the victim as she was collapsing, the theory would be that she approached after the poison had taken effect..."

Officer Rivaldi spoke cautiously. It wasn't that he didn’t have suspicions about the mysterious detective herself, so rather than being cautious, it might be more accurate to say he was being fair.

"...In other words, Kyoko-san isn’t the culprit. That’s the most reasonable conclusion at this point, but whether the Niagara Parks Police or the Canadian Police will see it that way is another matter. In fact, the cause of death being poisoning seems to be taken as evidence that it wasn’t a natural death, but rather a murder."

"Hmm, I see."

So that was how they were viewing it.

No, actually, it was quite reasonable. From the perspective of the Niagara Parks Police, it might seem odd that Officer Casteiz and his team were being swayed by the ‘advice’ of a key person of interest.

"So, Ms. Kyoko will be spending some time in the Niagara Parks Police holding cell, not just tonight, but for a while, right? Will she be okay?"

"I've informed them about her forgetful condition, so as long as it's for a short period, there shouldn't be any problems. Though they probably can't cover the walls entirely with newspapers like in her Manhattan office."

Even though the policewoman expressed concern, in terms of simple security, the holding cell at the Niagara Parks Police might be safer than the aging apartment building in Manhattan.

"So, regarding the autopsy, we're just waiting for further results as Ms. Kyoko suggested. Did the Canadian immigration authorities provide any information about the victim's identity?"

"It seems certain that she passed through Canadian immigration. There's video footage. Naturally, at that moment... she showed a passport, and her name was recorded, but..."

Officer Rivaldi hesitated after saying "at that moment," likely debating whether to add the caveat "unlike the Forgetful Detective." However, it seemed he decided that mentioning the erratic appearances of the mysterious illegal immigrant from Japan, even negatively, might derail the conversation.

Damn that 'KUNOICHI'.

"But apparently, it was a forged passport. And there's also testimony from tourists who saw the victim throw something into the river just before collapsing on the Rainbow Bridge."

So, it wasn't that everyone was so captivated by the majestic waterfall that they missed the woman collapsing. Even with the bystander effect, common sense would dictate that the more people there were, the more likely someone would take a different action. It would have been ideal if someone had captured the moment on their smartphone, but that might be asking too much.

"The 'something' being the fake passport?"

"The Canadian authorities believe that, feeling unwell and realizing she'd been poisoned, the victim decided to throw away her forged passport and any identification with her wallet before she passed out."

The American side seemed to have no objections to this view. Even though it was a forged passport, she likely disposed of it before she died out of fear that her identity would be traced back to the forger.

Environmental concerns aside, it was the perfect way to get rid of it.

Retrieving something from the bottom of Niagara Falls would be impossible, even for the US Navy. The officer wasn't familiar with the Canadian military, but she doubted they could manage it either.

"So, identifying the victim will be even harder than determining the cause of death."

"But the fact that she went to such lengths to hide her identity could be a clue in itself. When facing death, instead of seeking help or dialing 911, she chose to dispose of her forged passport first."

'Dialing'? What did he mean by 'dialing'?

Judging by the context, he probably meant calling an ambulance... But it felt like a generational gap, so Officer Casteiz decided not to ask for clarification.

Besides, even with the generational gap, the meaning was clear.

Officer Casteiz, having just written a will herself, could say from experience that in the moments before death, people tend to try to leave some kind of message. They want to leave behind words so that nothing is left unsaid.

Ms. Kyoko would probably call it a "dying message" in mystery novel terms... However, the victim’s actions in this case were the exact opposite.

Instead of leaving words, she tried to leave nothing behind, destroying evidence.

"That technique, ‘FUBO,’ it really feels like something from the ‘SHINOBI’."

Officer Rivaldi began.

"Up until now, we’ve suspected that the culprits were members of the assassination group ‘SHINOBI’ and sought Kyoko-san's advice based on that, but in this case, it's the victim who appears to be ‘SHINOBI’."

It was no wonder he spoke with such weariness. Why did he have to confront an assassination group that had no connection to his time in Okinawa, even less now in New York? And not just on Manhattan Island, which was their usual territory, but at the Niagara Falls Canadian border, which was technically outside their jurisdiction.

"Still, if you consider the ‘SHINOBI’ as modern-day spies or agents, then a sudden death at the border seems fitting. From tomorrow, the investigation will likely head in that direction, don’t you think?"

Given that the NYPD and FBI had gotten involved, the Niagara Parks Police must have long understood that this case in which they had apprehended an illegal immigrant from Japan was no ordinary matter. But now that the assassination group ‘SHINOBI’ was potentially involved,

the usual procedures may no longer apply. And on top of that, the False Accusations King was somehow involved.

The elements were flooding in. Like a waterfall.

"Kyoko-san kept saying that the assassination group ‘SHINOBI’ had been wiped out. Or was that just a ruse, and she was the last one?"

"That’s not necessarily the case, especially if the culprit is also ‘SHINOBI’. In any case, I have to head to the Thousand Islands first thing in the morning, so Officer Rivaldi, please take care of Ms. Kyoko’s protection. There’s a chance an unknown ‘SHINOBI’ could come after the renowned detective in the holding cell."

Or perhaps, it could be an assassin sent by the False Accusations King. If that was the case... her death wouldn’t just be an ordinary one abroad.

Officer Rivaldi replied,

"Kyoko-san’s protection? Ah, understood. I’ll handle it, no matter what. As long as I don’t forget."

He added, with a touch of sarcasm that was unusually sharp for him.

Come to think of it, being at the mercy of the Forgetful Detective’s unpredictable nature in an unfamiliar place might be just as much of an impossible task as meeting the False Accusations King on a remote island.

7

"Please let me call a detective, Assistant Officer Casteiz."

Yakusuke Kakushidate, a crazy villain you wouldn't even find in American comics and who turned every crime into a false accusation, said this through the acrylic panel—no, this wasn't an acrylic panel.

It was bulletproof glass.

Bulletproof glass thick like the tank of a giant shark aquarium, without even a small hole to let sound through. Considering this was a meeting with the False Accusations King, it was a necessary precaution.

"Please excuse my poor English… I seem to have forgotten everything I learned in school. This is just me winging it based on what I picked up on the plane."

Forgotten, he said.

Winging it, he said.

Because it was through this bulletproof, or perhaps security glass, the sound that got transmitted was inevitably muffled, creating an eerie atmosphere that made you want to react to every word.

As if the infamous inmate wasn't creepy enough already.

From his name, she knew he was Japanese, so she vaguely imagined someone petite, like Ms. Kyoko… but Yakusuke Kakushidate was a giant, even compared to the average American male.

Even while sitting, his head seemed higher than Officer Casteiz, who was standing… though she wasn't particularly short, so that must be an illusion.

He was intimidating.

After setting off at sunrise and arriving at Thousand Islands by long-distance bus, the tranquil and serene scenic beauty, so different from Niagara Falls, almost made her forget her purpose. Even as the local ranger ferried her to the island where this False Accusations Prison was located, she still felt as if she was floating in an unreal, imaginary world.

Even while being guided through the heavy, historic building, which seemed unimaginable as something hastily constructed for a single prisoner, it felt like a sightseeing tour of a historic site.

Then, she was abruptly yanked back to reality.

The meeting room beyond the bulletproof glass.

The False Accusations King, sitting in a simple metal chair bolted to the floor, wearing a prison uniform, chains on his hands and feet… somehow, even that chair seemed like a throne.

"…For someone who’s rusty, your English is quite good."

She had been thoroughly trained by her human rights-conscious boss that it was impolite to compliment a foreigner’s English skills, but in this case, it was the only thing she could say. Ever since she started seeing Ms. Kyoko, Officer Casteiz had been studying Japanese a bit, but she was not yet capable of holding a conversation.

"Thank you very much. Many people come to visit me, you see. I suppose learning through live conversation is more effective than studying from a textbook."

The intonation was off in places, but not enough to hinder the conversation. The fact that he had had ‘many visitors’ and had ‘live conversations’ with them was concerning… no, she needed to focus.

Their meeting time was limited.

She hadn’t come here to improve the False Accusations King’s English skills… There was no room for games.

"A person died at the Rainbow Bridge, which spans the Niagara River and serves as a border. We suspect that you were involved in this incident. If you claim this is a ‘false accusation,’ then please cooperate with the investigation and tell us everything you know."

"That’s why I told you. Please let me call a detective."

Yakusuke Kakushidate repeated the same phrase, as if he had already anticipated what she would say.

"And Assistant Officer Casteiz, you’re not saying the most important thing. It’s not me who’s suspected, but Ms. Kyoko, isn’t it?"

Ms. Kyoko.

The intonation on that alone was perfect.

Maybe it was because that part was in Japanese, or because they were both from the same country—however, their natures were polar opposites. Compared to the Forgetful Detective, who seemed to harbor no suspicion towards anyone, even in an interrogation room, this man exuded an air of suspicion that was almost palpable.

Out of all the criminals the policewoman had encountered, he was the one she wanted to keep the most distance from. Even through the bulletproof glass, it felt like he could have adverse effects on her mental health… Maybe meeting a notorious criminal from a foreign country wasn't such a good experience for an officer after all, contrary to her naive assumptions.

The difference in their temperaments was so vast that this experience wouldn't serve as any reference point.

As if sensing the reason why Officer Casteiz couldn't say a word, the False Accusations King smiled meaningfully:

"I’ve heard that you’re a regular client of the Forgetful Detective—though I was hoping to meet Officer Rivaldi as well, it’s a pity he didn’t come."

It was no wonder he knew her, who had signed in upon entering the building, but to think he even knew the name of her superior, Officer Rivaldi… What kind of information network did he have? She thought it was unrealistic for him to commit murder from inside the prison, but maybe it wasn't entirely impossible.

"I was also a regular client of Ms. Kyoko, you see. So, I feel as if I know you two quite well, like old acquaintances. Therefore, I won't hesitate to cooperate with the investigation. Ask me anything. I'll answer with all my ill will."

'All my ill will'?

Did he mean to say 'all my good will'? Or was he pretending to be bad at English while subtly threatening Officer Casteiz…? Through the bulletproof glass, not only his voice but even his expression was blurred.

"Please tell me the details of the case. Despite how I look, I'm well-versed in the law. In all the laws around the world, actually. I think I can be of help. In return…"

"There's no way I'm going to accept any conditions from you."

She spoke resolutely.

It might have been too hostile a stance towards the False Accusations King, who was trying to appear cooperative, at least superficially, but she had to draw that line.

Or rather, she was utterly fed up with backroom deals. The Forgetful Detective had her conditions, and so did the FBI agent. She wasn't about to entertain any demands from the False Accusations King on top of that.

"I'm sure you understand, but I'm with the NYPD, and my authority here in the Thousand Islands is limited. I don't have the power to release you from this place, Mr. Yakudoshi."

"It's Yakusuke. Heh heh, you know about Yakudoshi, huh? Even the Japanese are unfamiliar with that term these days... myself included. But don't misunderstand. I'm not asking to be released. Prison is like a free hotel for me. If anything, I'm saving on travel expenses."

'In fact, I'd rather not be released,' the False Accusations King said nonchalantly. He talked about it like he was a tourist, saying things like travel expenses. Even though she heard he had hijacked a plane…

As someone who lived off taxpayer money, it was infuriating to hear him speak so casually about this False Accusations Prison built with those very taxes. But if he wasn't asking for release, then what was he asking for?

"That’s why I’ve been saying, please let me call a detective. This is the third time now… My purpose in this journey, as I told immigration, is to meet Ms. Kyoko."

"I doubt you went through immigration."

"That was a joke. I heard Americans like jokes."

That was a stereotype.

Her superior didn’t understand jokes at all.

"Your purpose is to meet Ms. Kyoko… So, you’re confessing that you committed murder for that purpose? You caused a murder at the border to lure the Forgetful Detective from Manhattan?"

"That’s an amusing idea, but unfortunately, it’s pure fantasy. Where there’s a detective, there’s a case. Where there’s a case, there’s a detective—that’s a rule you just have to accept in mystery novels, but murder cases aren’t like moths to a flame."

"…"

"Besides, in this case, wasn’t Ms. Kyoko already at the scene? In other words, she was already in Niagara before the murder occurred. So, there was no need to commit murder."

He was well-informed.

Looks like she didn’t even need to give him the details of the case… As they spoke, information from all over America, where he was being framed for "false accusations," was likely flowing to him.

Not the FBI or CIA, more like the NSA.

Or perhaps… the assassination group ‘SHINOBI’.

"That's a valid point, but there are criminals who commit murder without any need or reason."

"If I were that kind of person, you wouldn’t be alive right now. Oops, that might have been a misleading statement. Please disregard it. English really is difficult."

She didn’t think it was because of his English…

Though she had no intention of negotiating, it seemed prudent to hear why this False Accusations King was so desperate (whatever he had done to get here) to meet Ms. Kyoko.

Why did he want this meeting more than an escape?

"I want to confess."

"What?"

"Oh, no, I misspoke. I want to warn her. I want to let her know that a threat is approaching her… Normally, this would be something I could handle with a simple international call, but there are multiple forces trying to cut off any connection between Ms. Kyoko and me, so I had no choice but to come here in person. I'm not one for such antiquated notions as the importance of face-to-face conversations, but even that failed, and now here I am, wrongly imprisoned."

The way he naturally claimed to be ‘wrongly imprisoned’ really drove home who she was dealing with—the False Accusations King. His shamelessness was impressive.

"A threat is approaching? Isn’t that threat you?"

That was what she had heard from the FBI agent.

From the perspective of the False Accusations King, the ‘forces trying to cut off any connection’ would probably be the federal government… but multiple forces? Could it be that White Birch's extraordinary efforts to protect the Forgetful Detective, even going beyond the witness protection program, were to shield her from this "regular customer" of hers...? The pieces were starting to fall into place.

"I’m an extremely harmless man. Harmless, innocent, and guiltless. I even wear a T-shirt with ‘Not Guilty’ written on it as everyday clothing."

"…Then who is harmful?"

"White Horse."

For some reason, the False Accusations King mentioned the name of a Canadian town. It was a tourist spot she had recently heard of. Indeed, Ms. Kyoko had mentioned it. She had said something like, just because she set foot in Canada didn't mean she was planning to go to Whitehorse to see the Northern Lights…

Had the Northern Lights craze spread so far while the NYPD had been wrapped up in dealing with the assassination group ‘SHINOBI’?

"Oh, no, not the Canadian town. Was my pronunciation off? But the fact that Ms. Kyoko mentioned the same name is particularly concerning. The situation seems to be worse than I feared."

"If it’s not a Canadian town, is it a Japanese one? Are there Western-sounding towns in Japan?"

"There are, but the White Horse I mentioned is a person's name."

A person's name.

Naturally, hearing that made her think of that FBI agent—that small man with blond hair and gold eyes, White Birch. She had made the same association at Table Rock Center, but could they really be related? Even if they were family, wouldn't it be strange for them to share the same first name, while their last names were different?

On the other hand, having the same first name could imply an even stronger connection than sharing a family name…

She had suspected that White Birch had an ulterior motive, considering he was deeply involved in the construction of this False Accusations Prison, even leading the project, yet never approaching the inmate himself and instead sending an NYPD officer… But, White Horse?

"Who is this person?"

"She's a criminal. And a true criminal at that. Or maybe she's a soldier? Perhaps I should say mercenary. Or a revolutionary. But she's also a member of an anti-war group, and part of an anti-government organization. You could even say she's a former slave who was trafficked. A murderer… might be going too far. Ah, English is really difficult."

The False Accusations King made a gesture as if holding his head.

He was toying with her.

At this point, she didn't know how much of what he said she could take at face value… Could it be that, despite being the False Accusations King himself, he was trying to pin the blame on someone else? Did this 'someone else' even exist? If she hadn't heard the keyword 'White Horse' from Ms. Kyoko beforehand, albeit as a place name, she wouldn't have given this nonsense a second thought.

…Of course, it was unrelated, but now that she thought about it, Niagara Falls, the Canadian side, was also called HORSESHOE FALLS… Ms. Kyoko had mentioned that too, along with an explanation of Mount Fuji.

Horseshoe.

Which meant… a horse's hoof.

"In my mind, the Japanese word 'Kagemusha' (body double) fits her best."

"'Kagemusha'? Isn't 'KAGE' the Japanese word for 'SHADOW'?"

"Yes. However, if you take it as 'Kage' with different characters, it refers to a horse's coat color. 'Kage Musha'… A fitting title for White Horse. A white horse stained with the color of dried blood."

The False Accusations King seemed pleased with himself for coming up with a fitting expression, but his self-satisfaction was irrelevant to her. So, was he saying that this person—allegedly a woman—was the mastermind behind the current case?

"Yes. Even though she's called White, she's the mastermind. Or maybe I should say because she's White. All of Ms. Kyoko's former students call themselves that."

"Former students…?"

'STUDENTS'?

Was Ms. Kyoko a teacher?

Now that he mentioned it, Ms. Kyoko did have the air of an educator when giving lectures on Japanese culture to Officer Rivaldi and Officer Casteiz. The latter had always attributed it to her being a detective, but perhaps she was simply accustomed to explaining things to others in a logical manner.....

"Precisely. However, it's more like she was their mentor rather than just a teacher. That's why all her students have a hard time letting go of her… None of them can leave the nest. Some of them are so desperate to pull Ms. Kyoko, who's already retired, back into the field."

Retired? Another poor choice of words, perhaps? Ms. Kyoko may have white hair, but she wasn't old. Shouldn't he have said something like 'second life'?

Calling being a detective a second life was something the officer could understand… Many in the NYPD had transitioned to private detectives after retiring as police officers.

"On the other hand, there are some former students who are working to protect Ms. Kyoko's second life. The students aren't united; it's like the 'Devil's Washboard' back in Japan, which is why the situation is so chaotic."

One of the people working to protect Ms. Kyoko's second life was FBI agent White Birch, she assumed? His behavior certainly exceeded the boundaries of an investigator. At one point, he boasted that protecting Ms. Kyoko in this country was his only job, but looking back now, that had been a rather tame statement.

"And what about you, Mr. Yakudo… Yakusuke?"

"Hm?"

"You don’t go by ‘White’? From what I’ve heard so far, you seem to be quite devoted to Ms. Kyoko."

While he seemed to be claiming ‘false accusation’ regarding his indictment for causing a murder at the Rainbow Bridge to call Ms. Kyoko, it was at least true that he had gotten himself imprisoned here just to meet her.

That wasn't something you could do with just ordinary obsession.

"Hahaha, maybe I should start calling myself ‘White Hyena’ from now on? What I’m doing is worship, not devotion. And besides, unfortunately, I only know Kyoko Okitegami as a detective."

Was that so? After all this talk about knowing her?

So, the False Accusations King was not just a title. He pretended to know more than he did, just like how he willingly took on false accusations.

"Despite how I may seem, I’m not the type to be interested in a woman’s past. That’s why, to her former students, I’m probably like a thorn in their side… or in their eyes? Anyway, they hate me. When it comes to hating me, her former students are as united as Ayers Rock."

"… Saying you’re not interested in a woman’s past sounds like you’re being understanding, but it also sounds irresponsibly like you’re trying to avoid getting to know her."

The policewoman ended up saying something that sounded just like Officer Rivaldi, but Yakusuke Kakushidate didn’t seem offended and simply nodded briefly.

"You’re absolutely right."

It felt like he had deftly sidestepped the argument. No matter how large or how much of a "King" he was, in this regard, he was taking the humble stance typical of Japanese culture. In any case, if he avoided the discussion itself, this meeting would be meaningless.

She needed to make it meaningful.

"… Where is this White Horse now? At Niagara Falls? Or literally in Whitehorse, Canada?"

Noticing that the time for the meeting was drawing to a close, Officer Casteiz steeled herself, ready to delve into the heart of the matter. To be honest, she was curious about the hints of Ms. Kyoko’s past, but the darkness surrounding it seemed too deep to approach merely out of morbid curiosity.

For now, she needed to fulfill her role—as an officer.

"She's the opposite from me. In other words, she’s somewhere other than a prison."

"? Is that another joke? If so, you should study American humor before English."

"I assure you, I'm being completely serious. The truth is, White Horse once made an unbelievable blunder in Japan. The bigger someone is, the bigger their mistakes, which is a problem. I'm not exaggerating when I say it nearly sparked a war. That’s why she’s now under surveillance from all over the world."

"Under surveillance…? I don’t quite follow. If this near-war scenario is not a joke, shouldn’t it be White Horse, not you, who’s incarcerated in this prison?"

"Unlike a ‘small fry’ like me, when you reach the level of Ms. Kyoko’s ‘KAGEMUSHA,’ arresting her itself is a risk. Putting her in prison or executing her could lead to riots. The best plan is to neutralize her as much as possible, release her into the wild, and observe her from a distance."

"…Just like what’s being done with Ms. Kyoko now?"

"Exactly."

The False Accusations King nodded.

Though she was currently in the Niagara Park Police’s holding cell… perhaps the reason both the FBI and even the Canadian government recognized the detective as a special person of interest had something to do with this.

"As an outsider unaware of the circumstances, letting such a person roam free seems more dangerous to me."

"Think of it in a positive way. It means that wherever White Horse is on Earth, her whereabouts are known. She’s under 24-hour surveillance, after all."

"I see. But if she’s under 24-hour surveillance, doesn’t that mean she couldn’t have committed the crime at Rainbow Bridge?"

"That’s why she uses them. The real culprit—and tricks."

"Tricks?"

The False Accusations King deliberately used an inverted phrasing to say that word,

"Yes. Causing an incident just to call a detective is fantasy. If you truly want to call a detective, you must resort to tricks… because detectives are drawn not to tourist spots or crime scenes, but to mysteries."

He spoke with a tone full of implications.

In the end, he didn’t demand release or freedom.

As if just his continued presence on this Thousand Islands was a significant setup in itself.

8

Staging a crime. Resorting to tricks.

Certainly, those two were similar but not the same—especially when it came to murder cases. The more elaborate the trick, the more it stood out, making it easier to expose.

But if standing out was the purpose, then resorting to tricks had meaning. As the False Accusations King said, while Ms. Kyoko had visited Niagara before the victim died, the trick might have been set up even before that.

It wasn't a perfect answer, but she was glad she had gathered some information she could report to the FBI agent. That said, Yakusuke Kakushidate did reveal the name of the real culprit, but reporting it verbatim was ill-advised. It was best to organize her thoughts before accusing someone who shared the same first name, "White," as Agent Birch... There were also issues of credibility. To put it mildly, his statements bordered on delusional.

On the other hand, the information was far too significant to keep to herself… So, the logical course of action would be to consult Officer Rivaldi, her direct superior.

Having left the island where the Innocence King was confined, physically intact if not mentally, Officer Casteiz boarded a long-distance bus back to Niagara, her mind preoccupied with documenting her conversation with Yakusuke Kakushidate in her phone's memo app.

Since recording was prohibited, she had to rely on her memory.

This might have been the perfect time to use the ‘FUBO’ technique, but if she’d started slashing her own skin in the visiting room, she might have ended up imprisoned herself. So, she tried her best not to miss a single word, but she still ended up forgetting some parts.

At this rate, she'd probably arrive at the Niagara Park Police Station by the time she finished drafting the report on her smartphone, muttering and groaning in thought, so at least she wouldn’t be bored during the trip. That’s when a notification popped up on her screen: ‘New email received.’

It was from Officer Rivaldi.

His superior wasn't exactly tech-savvy and preferred phone calls (dialing?) over emails, so maybe some new fact had come to light that couldn't wait for her return? Or maybe Ms. Kyoko had started saying something strange again…?

Officer Casteiz feared the latter, but when she opened the email, it was the former. It seemed the meticulous autopsy was finally completed.

Earlier, they had already revealed 'poisoning' as the cause of death, but unlike the recent 'HYORO-GAN' case, they also managed to identify the poison this time. Furthermore, unlike the 'SHURIKEN' case, the poison wasn't particularly of Oriental origin.

While it wasn't something you could find just anywhere in New York, it was still a drug that could be obtained relatively easily through underground routes. But because it was an underground route, it would be difficult to trace the culprit through the source of the poison.

One step forward, two steps back.

At least they had managed to build a prison along the way.

However, even if they couldn't figure out the source, they did figure out how the poison entered the victim's body—and this was probably why the superior, unfamiliar with the intricacies of email, had reached out before her return.

It hadn't been mixed into food or drink, nor had it been injected directly into the bloodstream—it was through the wound on her left arm… To be precise, it was through one of the many wounds on her left arm that the lethal poison had entered.

They found traces of a relatively new wound that had been cut with a blade coated in poison.

"…What?"

She couldn't help but speak aloud.

When she first heard it was poisoning, she had dismissed the wounds all over the body as unrelated, and even if she hadn't, she had assumed the shallow cuts that didn't require stitches weren't life-threatening.

But even if the wounds were shallow, even if they were as deep as hesitation cuts from a suicide attempt, when the blade was coated in poison, that changed everything. Depending on the type of poison, just a graze could be fatal.

In that case, the possibility of suicide, which they had dismissed, was back on the table—or was it? Although poisoning oneself in this way was rather eccentric… Still, it was more realistic than assuming the female victim was a user of the assassination group ‘SHINOBI’s’ secret ‘FUBO’ technique.

Perhaps they should consider the possibility of a suicidal individual who, under the influence of a slow-acting poison—or rather, an anesthetic that clouded her judgment—had attempted a dramatic leap from the Rainbow Bridge. And maybe she miscalculated and succumbed to the anesthetic before she could jump...?

But if that was the case, then the False Accusations King's story was complete nonsense. Good grief, now she felt like an idiot for diligently transcribing their conversation.

She tried to console herself by thinking that at least she’d avoided making a strange report and embarrassing herself, but as she continued reading the email, it seemed she still had to make a strange report after all.

The detailed autopsy results further indicated that, based on muscle development and other factors, the female victim was highly likely to have been left-handed.

That’s what it said.

"Left-handed?"

Could she really have done daily tasks like writing with that left arm covered in wounds? For a moment, she found myself thinking something foolish, but that wasn't the point.

If the victim was left-handed, then naturally, the right arm should have borne the brunt of the injuries. Writing, using a blade… these tasks would be done with the left hand. While not entirely impossible depending on flexibility, it was incredibly awkward to inflict injuries on one's own left arm with a blade held in the left hand.

And if the fatal wound was on the left arm, that meant the victim wasn’t a user of the ‘FUBO’ technique—moreover, it wasn’t suicide either.

Things were getting complicated.

9

"Well, well, good day! Assistant Officer Casteiz, we had a great time sightseeing at Niagara yesterday! I heard you went to Thousand Islands, and I was looking forward to hearing all about it!"

When she opened the door to the Niagara Park Police Station's interrogation room, Ms. Kyoko greeted her with such a bright salutation. Struck as the officer was by an overwhelming sense of discomfort, the fatigue from her long journey made it hard for her to grasp the source of that discomfort for a moment… But she soon figured it out.

The Forgetful Detective had referred to something that happened "yesterday." Even though it had been "one day" since they last met, she didn't say "Nice to meet you"—in other words, her memory hadn't been reset.

Setting aside the fact that she called it "sightseeing," Ms. Kyoko clearly remembered crossing over to the Canadian side of Niagara.

The policewoman glanced at Officer Rivaldi, who was sitting across from the detective, silently questioning him as to what was going on, but despite not having endured a long bus ride, he looked even more exhausted than yesterday. If she had to put it into words, his expression seemed to be saying "HELP ME." He wasn't the type to show such weakness in front of his subordinates, though…

"Ahahaha! Well, it seems my 'FUBO' theory, which I so eloquently explained, turned out to be completely irrelevant! Imagine my embarrassment! Misreading the victim’s dominant hand is such a basic mistake! I just want to sleep and forget about it as soon as possible!"

…Of course.

Not only did she retain her memory, but Ms. Kyoko also seemed more cheerful and bright than usual—more than that, she was simply in high spirits, or in other words, she was in the condition that comes after an all-nighter.

Although Ms. Kyoko had spent the night in the Niagara Park Police Station’s holding cell, she hadn’t slept… It wasn't like the pillow didn’t suit her or anything. If she wanted to, she was the type of person who could sleep comfortably on the floor. Her ability to doze off anywhere rivaled that of a seasoned soldier.

In other words, Ms. Kyoko hadn’t slept since yesterday because she wanted to stay involved in this incident at Rainbow Bridge. It was the first time she hadn’t said "Nice to meet you," and it was also the first time they had met Ms. Kyoko after she had pulled an all-nighter… So, this was the kind of mood she got into.

No wonder Officer Rivaldi looked more exhausted than someone who had just taken a long round trip by bus after being subjected to this excessive cheerfulness. She was about 30% more exhausting than usual.

The policewoman had suspected he was being dragged around by her whims, but… it seemed a sleep-deprived Forgetful Detective was the worst possible match for Officer Rivaldi.

"I’m glad you made it back, Assistant Officer Casteiz. Now, take a seat and tell us your report. Kyoko-san has been eagerly awaiting it."

As the officer thought about how this was the first time she’d ever been welcomed so warmly by her difficult superior, she took a seat as suggested, and launched the memo app on her smartphone. The notes she had written while half-asleep were somewhat disjointed, but she could still manage to decipher them.

With the premise of the victim being a "FUBO" practitioner now debunked, she wasn’t sure how much meaning the meeting and interrogation at the False Accusations Prison held at this point, but for now, she’d share all the information she had.

There was a political element involved in deciding how much investigative information to disclose to Ms. Kyoko, who was technically an outsider, a civilian, and also a mysterious illegal immigrant, as well as someone under protection. But well, she was the Forgetful Detective after all.

Whatever they talked about there, she’d forget by tomorrow. That said, if the investigation continued to be challenging, she might pull another all-nighter, but even Ms. Kyoko must have her limits when it came to staying awake.

Besides, without the "FUBO" angle, the detective's motivation had likely plummeted. It wouldn’t be surprising if she just collapsed and fell asleep on the interrogation room table… So, in contrast to how the officer was holding off on reporting to Agent White Birch, it was crucial that she shared the story of Thousand Islands without holding back, so that Ms. Kyoko could get some rest as soon as possible.

"Oh, the False Accusations King? There sure are some strange people in the world! Though I can’t say I don’t relate, since I’m also in custody here with the police! But to have an entire prison built just for one person—what a grand scale! I wish I could be like that too!"

Ms. Kyoko said energetically, looking strangely pleased.

It seemed she had no recollection about clearing any of the so-called "false accusations" from the False Accusations King, thanks to Agent White Birch’s efforts to keep her away from him. Naturally.

"And as for someone named White Horse, I'm afraid I don't know anyone by that name! Even if you say she’s someone from my past, I’m sorry, but I don’t remember anything about her… A former student? As someone born to be a detective, I can't imagine having any pupils."

Of course, the officer had expected as much, but compared to her reaction to the False Accusations King, she showed absolutely no interest in the episodes related to her own past—truly the Forgetful Detective.

It seemed like she was treating it as someone else's problem entirely, but on the contrary, if it really were someone else's problem, she might show a bit more interest—like how she was envious of the False Accusations Prison.

It seemed that with the revelation that the victim wasn't a user of the 'FUBO' technique, meaning she wasn't someone who embodied a self-sacrificial death, Ms. Kyoko had lost almost all her empathetic engagement with the case. In hindsight, that empathy might have been something the Forgetful Detective felt solely towards someone who was a practitioner of the 'FUBO' technique… Relieved that the overly eager attitude she had before was gone, even if her current high spirits were still dangerous, the officer continued her explanation.

"As far as I can deduce, it seems you had some sort of master-disciple confrontation with this person in Japan… and as a result, you were banished to New York."

"I see. Well, that doesn't really matter to me."

Still, it was rare to see someone with amnesia so uninterested in their own past. Not that the policewoman knew any other people with amnesia, but wouldn't they usually embark on a journey of self-discovery? Not on a sightseeing trip.

On the flip side, Kyoko Okitegami might be someone with such a traumatic past that she desperately wanted to cut it off… and the attitudes of Agent White Birch and Yakusuke Kakushidate seemed to support that notion.

"That being said, I was quite impressed by his words that one should not create incidents to call a detective, but rather use tricks. The False Accusations King sure said something profound. I'd love to meet him!"

"You shouldn't make any rash decisions in your sleep-deprived state."

The federal government had built a prison on an isolated island specifically to prevent that meeting. While the officer didn't feel any obligation to Agent White Birch, she didn't want Ms. Kyoko to go and undo all his hard work. It seemed that back in Japan, Ms. Kyoko had cleared the False Accusations King of his false charges, but it would be problematic if she used the same methods here in the United States.

Agent Birch's greatest fear was the reunion of the False Accusations King and the Forgetful Detective.

"So, if it’s not the assassination group ‘SHINOBI,’ then does that mean either the False Accusations King or White Horse is the culprit in the Rainbow Bridge case?"

Officer Rivaldi said with a tone of relief, as if he was glad that it had finally become a "normal" murder case. His subordinate didn’t want to burst his bubble, but the mystery of how Ms. Kyoko was lured to Niagara Falls still remained unsolved.

"Yes. If the victim had been a user of the ‘FUBO’ technique, I would have deduced that she had some sort of background as a spy, but since that’s not the case, perhaps she was a client."

Ms. Kyoko had lost some of its earlier energy—perhaps she was just feeling drowsy. While she continued to hypothesize with some momentum, she had likely lost the motivation to stay awake and tackle the case now that she had lost her empathy for the victim.

"A client? You mean?"

"Yes. After listening to the False Accusations King’s story, a thought just crossed my mind… A detective will go wherever there’s a request. I had thought I came to Niagara as a tourist, but maybe that was a misunderstanding."

"Are you sure it wasn’t perjury?"

Officer Rivaldi leaned forward. Certainly, if the unidentified victim and Ms. Kyoko were scheduled to meet at Rainbow Bridge, the entire narrative would change. The story of her being a passing bystander who performed life-saving measures on the collapsed victim would fall apart.

Was she pretending to be a carefree tourist to deceive the Niagara Park Police and the NYPD?

Could that be a confession?

"No, I don't know either. Because I don't remember."

"You don't remember…?"

Officer Casteiz looked over at Officer Rivaldi, seeking confirmation.

"...Ms. Kyoko has been awake this whole time, right? That's why her memory is continuous?"

"Ah, yes. I've repeatedly urged her to sleep, but she stubbornly insists on me telling her some amusing stories instead."

What kind of interaction did they have while she was dealing with the False Accusations King?

"To be precise, it's only my memories from Niagara onward that are continuous. Or rather, from the long-distance bus from Manhattan to Niagara."

'When I woke up, I was on the bus.'

Ms. Kyoko said this—it was true that Officer Casteiz had also dozed off while jotting down notes on the bus back from Thousand Islands, and considering the distance from Manhattan, staying awake the entire time without a break was quite difficult…

Indeed, when Ms. Kyoko was asked about her purpose yesterday, she had responded, "Isn't it sightseeing, Officer Rivaldi?" with a questioning tone. That wouldn't have passed a border inspection. Sightseeing?

"So, I thought I was heading for sightseeing. But to maintain confidentiality, I might have intentionally slept on the bus to reset my memory. After all, I am a detective."

"You slept on the bus to protect the client's personal information? So that you would forget not only the client's identity but even the fact that there was a request?"

Considering the principle of absolute confidentiality upheld by the Okitegami Detective Agency, that wasn't an entirely far-fetched hypothesis. In fact, it made more sense than the idea of the Forgetful Detective coming to Niagara for sightseeing and coincidentally encountering an incident.

It wasn't by chance; there was intent.

"It's a hypothesis that connects with the vision of the unidentified victim. But in that case, when you met at the designated place—was it Rainbow Bridge?—how would you be able to determine if the person was your client, Kyoko-san?"

"You're exactly right! As expected of the famous officer, no, the brilliant officer!

Ms. Kyoko suddenly exclaimed.

Her post-all-nighter mood swings were intense—there was a big difference between a "famous Officer" and a "brilliant Officer" in English.

"Even if Ms. Kyoko couldn't tell, wouldn't the client be able to recognize her? After all, it's Niagara Falls. While there might be many Japanese tourists, a young woman with white hair would be quite rare, even globally."

"It wouldn't work if only the client could recognize her. Even if they approached Ms. Kyoko, who was completely in sightseeing mode, and said, 'I'm the one who called you,' they wouldn't be able to prove it."

"They would need some form of identification—but the victim probably wanted to hide her identity from the start. It’s unlikely she would have revealed her true identity to Ms. Kyoko when making the request."

"Wishing to remain anonymous? Well, that wouldn’t be unusual for a private detective’s client. While forged passports are illegal, we live in an age where personal information is highly valued."

"How about a tally stick!"

Ms. Kyoko energetically wedged into the discussion between Officer Rivaldi and Officer Casteiz… A tally stick? As in, she had 'wedged in' with a 'tally stick'?

She looked rather pleased with herself, as if she had done something clever, but what was a tally stick again? It sounded vaguely familiar…

"Oh, isn’t that what you use for counting in the Eastern tabletop game, mahjong?"

"Yes, that’s it, the scoring for the split rule is really hard to remember—no, wait, it’s not mahjong! Though, it does resemble a seven pairs hand!"

Ms. Kyoko cheerfully retorted.

The officer hadn’t meant to joke, but… it resembled a seven pairs hand?

"You mean like tearing a hundred-dollar bill in half and each person holding one part? It’s a method often seen in negotiations…"

Officer Rivaldi, who couldn’t quite keep up with the younger generation’s banter, shared his knowledge based on his field experience.

That's when the policewoman remembered.

It was an item used in trade in the past. You split a stick in half, and each party held one piece. At the meeting place, if the two halves matched, it confirmed the legitimacy of the deal without needing to prove identity or background.

Indeed, so that was why it resembled a seven pairs hand. A hand where you collected two of each tile… Mahjong was an Eastern game, but seven pairs was an American hand.

Cultural appreciation acknowledged.

"In that case, wouldn’t a password work just as well?"

"If it’s something intangible, Kyoko-san would forget it, right? In fact, she deliberately forgot and went to the meeting place… so something tangible like a tally stick would be necessary."

"But as you can see, I’m empty-handed."

Ms. Kyoko waved her hands around. Coming to Niagara Falls empty-handed was quite the feat for a tourist, but on that note, the female victim had also been empty-handed. Or perhaps, just before her death, she had thrown all her belongings into the Niagara River to dispose of the tally stick? No, that seemed unlikely. There was no need to risk your life to dispose of a tally stick that was meaningless on its own.

"If the culprit stole the tally stick from her… then it would only make sense if the culprit approached Ms. Kyoko pretending to be the client. That would call the credibility of the tally stick idea itself into question…"

"Isn’t it possible they simply forgot to arrange how to meet up at Rainbow Bridge?"

That seemed like an extreme case of forgetfulness, but in the real world, which wasn’t a mystery novel, such human errors were quite common. That's why the victim wasn't a member of the SHINOBI, who used the FUBO technique to prevent such forgetfulness.

…The ‘FUBO’ technique wasn’t used.

Since she was left-handed, it would be difficult for her to inflict wounds on herself with her left arm… But if that was the case, then what about all those wounds? The autopsy revealed that one of them was a fatal wound inflicted by a poison-coated blade.

But what about the other wounds? Since she couldn’t have inflicted them with her left hand, someone else must have done it, but there were many old scars as well. Did this mean the possibility of her being subjected to continuous abuse or torture would resurface?

Perhaps she sought help from a detective to escape, tried to flee across the border, but was discovered and poisoned… At first glance, it seemed like a plausible storyline, but it didn’t quite fit that a woman held captive in a foreign country would request help for her escape from a detective on Manhattan Island.

"I understand the confidentiality, Kyoko-san. But did you really forget everything without leaving even a single note? You’d think there’d be at least some hint written down somewhere."

"That would make sense, but…"

As she spoke, Ms. Kyoko rolled up her left sleeve, just as she had done yesterday. But the only writing there was the usual "I am Kyoko Okitegami" ID statement, with no hints at all. Even when she turned her arm over and rolled up her sleeve to her upper arm, there was nothing written.

There wasn't even a single scratch, let alone a note.

At this point, was the hypothesis that the victim was Ms. Kyoko's client and they were supposed to meet in Niagara entirely wrong?

"Bandage."

Suddenly, Officer Rivaldi spoke up, as if he had just remembered… No, he actually did seem to recall it while watching Ms. Kyoko's motion of rolling up her sleeve.

As a kind of experiential memory.

"Now that I think about it, Ms. Kyoko, didn't you mention something about wearing a bandage? Was it on your leg or somewhere?"

"...I did, didn't I?"

It might have been yesterday, but since Ms. Kyoko hadn't slept since then, for her, it was as if it happened earlier that day. Officer Casteiz also remembered in a chain reaction… But hadn't that been just a metaphor?

When explaining the secret 'FUBO' technique, Ms. Kyoko had mentioned in passing that while most people wouldn't forget the reason for their injuries, someone with a forgetful nature like herself might wake up to find a bandage on their leg and not know how they got injured. It was just a casual remark in response to Officer Casteiz' understanding.

It was impressive that he had even remembered it. But.

"……"

The once cheerful Ms. Kyoko suddenly became quiet, and while still seated, she reached out to the hem of her skirt. It was a long skirt, a style the officer had never seen her wear before—she never seemed to wear the same outfit twice. As she gathered the fabric, there it was.

As expected, her entire left shin was wrapped in a white bandage.

"…Does it hurt? You were acting as if you'd completely forgotten about the injury."

"There's no pain. No, none at all."

She was rapidly losing her energy. What was wrong, Ms. Kyoko?

It seemed that until Officer Rivaldi pointed it out, the white-haired girl hadn’t realized she had a bandage on her left leg, and this fact seems to have deeply wounded her pride as a master detective.

Perhaps she thought she was unfit to be a detective if she forgot something without even sleeping, but this might just be an easy mistake caused by not sleeping. Even if she could maintain her memory by staying awake, it seemed the disadvantages are greater.

Lack of sleep might make one more energetic, but it also led to a decrease in concentration.

It seemed the same went for her exhaustive reasoning.

However, even though Officer Rivaldi was a human rights advocate, he was still from a generation that lacks delicacy.

"Then, could it be that ‘yesterday's Ms. Kyoko' was pretending to be injured and hid an important note in that bandage?"

Personally, the officer wished he wouldn’t have pressed the issue like that, but a downcast Ms. Kyoko, while bending over, began to unravel the bandage, saying, "Well, I suppose that could be the case."

No, couldn’t she build up the suspense a little?

She really wasn't used to being the audience for someone else's deductions.

They may not have been the best audience either, but surely they could have feigned some surprise, like "What? What do you mean? Please explain, Ms. Kyoko!"

"What do you think? On closer inspection, it seems there’s a faint bloodstain on this bandage. If there's no pain, perhaps there wasn't a real injury. A scratch like this wouldn't even be considered an injury on the battlefield. It's possible it simply healed and I forgot to remove the bandage."

She muttered complaints as she unwrapped the bandage, inexplicably bringing up the battlefield. As if Officer Ribaldi, who was right there, hadn't experienced his fair share of war.

When that False Accusations King had hinted at Ms. Kyoko’s past, Officer Casteiz couldn’t imagine her as anything other than a detective, but now, in a different sense, the officer couldn’t help but think that this person was incapable of playing any role other than a detective.

However, if her comment about the faint bloodstain wasn't just a desperate lie, then the hypothesis that a note was hidden under the bandage on her skin collapsed… If she was resorting to such easily exposed lies for the sake of appearances, she really would be unfit to be a master detective.

She would become nothing.

It would be, as the False Accusations King put it, the end of her "retirement" or "second life"—indeed.

"...Hmm."

"Hmm…"

"Hmm?"

The three of them in the interrogation room leaned forward in their chairs and stared at Ms. Kyoko's shin, creating a rather odd scene, but to cut to the conclusion, the skin that had been covered by the bandage was, like her left arm that acted as her main memo pad, completely unblemished.

There were no scabs, no old scars to be found… and of course, no signs of fresh wounds that might suggest the 'FUBO' technique had been used.

She bore no scars on her shin.

Up to that point, Officer Rivaldi's prediction had been spot on—but on the other hand, unlike her left arm, there were no markings made with a magic marker or any other writing instrument.

There wasn't even a single letter, let alone a code or a drawing.

"…What does this mean?"

If she had simply been injured, that would be understandable. It wouldn't be all that surprising if Ms. Kyoko had tripped while walking in Central Park.

Finding a password for meeting up with the client written on uninjured skin would be surprising, but it wouldn't be unbelievable… It would actually make sense. But how should they interpret the fact that there was no injury, no writing, and the bandage was wrapped around her leg for seemingly no reason?

"There is a reason. In this bandage itself, or rather..."

Then.

Ms. Kyoko, who had straightened up before anyone else, placed the unwrapped bandage across her hands like hand-pulled somen noodles. The way she presented it, it was clear she hadn’t forgotten her job as an advisor on Japanese culture—nor had she forgotten her true calling.

Even if she was lacking sleep and concentration, she was still a master detective.

"What do you mean, Ms. Kyoko? Are you saying that this bandage itself was the tally stick for meeting with the client at Rainbow Bridge?"

Rather than responding with the same indifference she’d shown earlier, Officer Rivaldi gave almost the best possible reaction. He may be a strict superior, but he wasn't a bad person.

"It’s not a tally stick. But you were close. Your intuition wasn’t wrong, Officer Rivaldi."

Gone was the meekness she had displayed earlier. As if trying to regain her prestige as a master detective, Ms. Kyoko began wrapping the bandage again.

This time, not around her left leg, but around her left arm.

Skillfully, she wrapped it to cover her ID.

"If I had to describe it, I’d say this is a ‘MAKIMONO.’"

"‘KIMONO’? The traditional garment worn by Japanese women?"

"Not ‘KIMONO,’ but ‘MAKIMONO,’ Officer Rivaldi… A compilation of all kinds of secret techniques, including the ‘FUBO’ technique, so to speak."

In other words, a ninja scroll.

That's how Ms. Kyoko called it—"the compilation of secret techniques." The words sounded like the signal for the beginning of what could be the final lesson from the ‘teacher’ who had been lecturing the NYPD about the assassination group ‘SHINOBI.’

The final lesson.

Or perhaps… the master detective’s final farewell.

10

Officer Casteiz was familiar with the term "MAKIMONO," but only through comics and the like, where it was depicted as an item that ninjas would hold in their mouths before transforming into

toads. The "MAKIMONO" being referred to here had a broader meaning and was best understood as a type of "BOOK."

Moreover, Officer Rivaldi's mishearing of 'KIMONO' wasn't entirely off the mark either. That traditional Eastern garment, if she recalled correctly, involved wrapping a long cloth called an 'OBI' around the waist several times.

Just like a bandage.

"This bandage isn't a tally stick; it's a kind of cipher communication. I believe it originated in the West, rather than the East—during wars long ago, they used to use long, thin pieces of cloth like this for sending messages."

"A cipher communication using cloth?"

Modern-day cipher communication brought to mind electronic methods, but during wars in ancient times… no, perhaps the risk of having those communications intercepted wasn't so different from today.

Was that why they used ciphers?

But the cipher could still be broken. To prevent that, they would need something like the FUBO technique, where information was held solely within the messenger's mind… But then, like a game of telephone, there was a risk of crucial information becoming distorted. Writing it down was still the most reliable method.

Then, why cloth? And why use a cloth like a bandage to record a message…

"Ah. Now that you mention it, I remember reading something like that in a war history book. Wasn't it called a Scytale…? The messenger on horseback would carry a long strip of cloth, and the recipient would have a stick of the prescribed size."

"A stick?"

Officer Rivaldi, who was knowledgeable about things other than Japanese culture, mentioned a stick, but… even for ancient warfare, wasn't fighting with sticks a bit too ancient?

"Not a weapon, but a key, Assistant Officer Casteiz. Like a password for deciphering the code… You wrap the cloth around the entire stick. Then, the text written on the cloth becomes readable."

She knew what he was talking about.

In Officer Casteiz' case, she probably hadn't read it in a book but learned it in history class, and she remembered now that it had been brought up… She had forgotten because it wasn't an experiential memory.

Cipher communication that only worked if both the sender and receiver had sticks of the same dimensions. In other words, unless you had the key—this stick—no matter how brilliant your mind was, you couldn't decipher the code.

The cloth alone was meaningless.

If you wrote the desired message along the curvature of the cloth when it was wrapped around the stick, once you unraveled it, the message became jumbled and unreadable. It was like a jigsaw puzzle, but even if you wrapped it around a different stick, the same message wouldn't appear. The stick... the circumference of the cylinder, and the way it was wrapped, must be exactly the same, or the contents of the communication wouldn't revert to their original form.

Ancient wisdom indeed.

She didn't think it could be applied today, but at least it didn't seem as dangerous as the 'FUBO' technique… However, what did this mean?

"Even if the bandage is the cloth for the message, the victim didn't have a stick, did she? Unlike a forged passport, if she had thrown something that long into the river, it would have stood out, and there would have been more witnesses."

"There's a Japanese saying, 'My legs turned to sticks' when you're tired from walking around."

Ms. Kyoko pointed to her left leg, which had been wrapped in a bandage until just a moment ago, and said:

"She turned her arm into a stick. To make that ancient wisdom work in modern times."

She then showed the bandage now wrapped around her left arm… her arm?

With the victim's left arm covered in wounds... no, precisely because of her many wounds, unlike Ms. Kyoko's uninjured left leg, wrapping a bandage around it would make it fit perfectly.

And that was it.

Just like with a stick, the thickness of a human arm, meaning the circumference, varied greatly… It could very well be the key to a cipher. To put it extremely, it was like a fingerprint or DNA. A bandage wrapped around a specific part of a specific person's body couldn't be wrapped in the same way on a different part of another person's body.

It was like a perfectly tailored order-made item.

In other words, even without knowing the other person's face or name, if the bandage wrapped perfectly, it proved that you had found the right person.

A tally stick.

Of course, maintaining a strict body shape would be a prerequisite… But could it be that the wounds were for that purpose? Not for memory techniques. Ms. Kyoko mentioned that there were faint bloodstains left behind… The bandage would be wrapped to match those bloodstains and scars. In other words, they served as a guideline. Otherwise, there would be discrepancies in the angle at which the bandage was wrapped around the rounded arm.

Exchanging bloodstained bandages wasn't exactly recommended from a hygienic standpoint... But this wasn't a field hospital.

The wounds on other parts of her body were so-called camouflage… and in that case, the wounds on the left arm were, after all, self-inflicted. That's right, just because she was left-handed didn't mean she had to write or use chopsticks with it.

It was a blade.

Rather, it would be more effective for the purpose at hand if she clumsily cut herself with her 'non-dominant hand,' making the wound random. Furthermore, if the fact that it was the left arm itself was part of the message—intended to evoke sympathy.

Then what about the poison?

"…It's possible to imagine a scenario where a force trying to prevent the meeting between the client and the detective preemptively applied poison to the blade the victim used. That way, without laying a hand on her, the victim would end up ingesting the poison herself."

A remote murder.

It was like disrupting encrypted communication with a virus… They didn't try to decipher the code from the outside but instead broke the stick.

In that case, even if Ms. Kyoko had met up with someone at Rainbow Bridge, she wouldn't have thought to wrap the 'unfamiliar bandage' that had been on her leg around the other person's arm. Moreover, the victim had hidden her injuries under her clothing.

"Only God knows what the request was that made them call me all the way from Manhattan, but we might still be able to get a hint. It's not too late; we could try wrapping this bandage around the victim's arm."

Ms. Kyoko said this as she rotated her left arm from the elbow down, examining the inside and outside of the bandage she had wrapped.

"Looking at it wrapped around my arm like this, you can see some bloodstains with unnatural patterns among the others. Maybe these aren't just guidelines, but by wrapping them around the victim's left arm, which is the key, they might form some kind of message. It's like a preemptive dying message."

'It might even help identify the victim,' Ms. Kyoko said as she expertly unwrapped the bandage and handed it to Officer Rivaldi.

The man, who had put on gloves to avoid leaving fingerprints, asked the Forgetful Detective, unnecessarily by the way:

"Are you sure about this, Kyoko-san?"

Continuing, ever the square man:

"This will explain why you were there, and it will likely clear you of any suspicion of murder, but what about your confidentiality to the client?"

"She passed away before I could take on the case, so technically, she wasn't a client yet. Besides, doesn't this country not protect the personal information of the deceased? That protection is revoked."

She said this nonchalantly, unusually detached for Ms. Kyoko, and then added:

"So, can I sleep now? There's a saying from a writer who once graced Japanese currency, 'rinse your mouth with a rock and rest your head on a river'—meaning 'refuse stubbornly to admit you are wrong'. I've been wanting to try out the pillow in the Niagara Parks Police detention center."

She let out a big, genuine yawn.

As if she had no interest as a detective in the message that might emerge when the bandage was wrapped around the victim's left arm.

As a detective.

Or as Kyoko Okitegami.

11

WELCOME BACK, WHITE CAT.

That was the message written on the bandage.

The message that emerged when the bloodstains scattered across the bandage were aligned and connected, disregarding those that didn't match the wounds.

"White Cat? Another new character? Is that also one of her former students' nicknames, Agent Birch?"

While rattling off question marks, the officer swallowed the words 'just like you'—it was better to watch her tone with an FBI agent on the other side of the remote screen who had the authority to build an entire prison in a rush. What would she do if they built a prison just for her?

"Ah, no, White Cat isn't a student, it's a nickname for the teacher. You know how you give your homeroom teacher a nickname, right? This is just a piece of information I'm sharing with you."

"Please don't give me special treatment. I'm not special. So, Ms. Kyoko… was Kyoko Okitegami's old nickname White Cat?"

And they were saying welcome back?

To an illegal immigrant from Japan?

"Are they saying it as an American? Or as a Canadian?"

In the end, that straightforward message didn't help identify the victim. Jane Doe remained Jane Doe. It turned out that Ms. Kyoko's decision to go to sleep quickly was the right one… The investigation, unfortunately, had been left entirely to the Niagara Parks Police, but it would probably turn into a cold case.

It was an unsatisfactory ending for a detective novel.

Even though the trick had been revealed, the mystery remained, and the culprit was unknown.

"But politically, that might be for the best. In Japan, we say, 'Let sleeping dogs lie.'"

"Ms. Kyoko also said, 'Only God knows.' Regarding the intentions of the client who called her out…"

"No matter who the client was, I think the bandage that was mailed to her office meant something like this… 'Welcome back to the battlefield.'"

The battlefield?

Was that why the bloodstained bandage, like something out of a field hospital?

The white of the bandage… and the brownish, dried blood.

The False Accusations King said that the showdown between the White Horse and the ‘KAGEMUSHA' in Japan had nearly escalated into a war… But no, unlike Officer Rivaldi, Ms. Kyoko didn’t look like a former soldier.

A former teacher, maybe… but…

"…But that former student was killed before they could meet her directly, right?"

The former homeroom teacher was indifferent to her former student. She didn’t say anything that suggested she mourned their death. Since she had no memory, it was natural for her to keep a professional distance from the victim as a detective, but even so… it was a far cry from the sense of distance she had when she was pulled into a self-sacrificing death and went all the way to Canada.

However, at the same time, it was undeniable that Ms. Kyoko had done everything she could to resurrect a stranger who had collapsed at the border.

The policewoman couldn’t help but think, she hoped it brought some comfort. Even if it couldn’t save a life.

"That’s right. The students of White Cat aren’t a monolith… There are also forces that don’t want Kyoko Okitegami to make a comeback."

She almost let slip, "Aren’t you one of those forces?" but she managed to hold back just in time.

Instead, she asked:

"Which side is White Horse on?"

It was a name the False Accusations King had mentioned as the ‘true culprit,’ but in a situation like this, even those words had multiple facets. Was it referring to the true culprit who killed the victim, or the one who sent the culprit?

"Does White Horse want Ms. Kyoko to come back or not?"

"White Horse is one of the most fervent supporters among the students. She wouldn’t resort to such roundabout methods. That wild horse would probably start by sinking Manhattan Island."

He disagreed with the False Accusations King.

Of course, neither of them would fully reveal their thoughts to Officer Casteiz… she felt like a messenger who had failed to deliver their message.

A messenger between the False Accusations King and the FBI agent.

No, originally, she had been serving as the intermediary between the Forgetful Detective and the FBI agent as well… being handed a bandage with incomprehensible patterns, running back and forth.

Even though she had made her legs stiff as sticks, she didn't have the crucial arm for the key, so she didn't even know what role she was supposed to be playing.

What a pitiful state.

She was starting to wonder if it was time not just to submit a transfer request but a resignation letter when Agent Birch said resolutely:

"In any case, you're relieved of your duties now, Assistant Officer Casteiz."

Huh? Did he have the authority to fire her?

She panicked. Wanting to quit and being told to quit were two different things.

"D-Did I do something wrong?"

"No, no, you've done far more than expected. You and Officer Rivaldi both. If I had the authority, I'd give you a bonus and promote you two ranks."

"Wouldn't that mean we'd be posthumously promoted?"

"That's not what I meant. I meant that your role, watching over Kyoko Okitegami at the request of the NYPD, is over as of today."

"Huh…?"

She was dumbfounded.

She must have looked quite foolish with her mouth hanging open, because Agent Birch shrugged his shoulders and tried to cover for her, saying, "What's the matter? Are you disappointed?"

"I thought you'd be relieved to be freed from work that wasn't part of your job."

"So, you were aware you were pushing extra work onto me… Well, I'm glad to be released, but why? Is it because I know too much?"

"You don't know too much. You guys don't even know one percent of Kyoko Okitegami… and don't worry, even I, who consider myself an expert on her, might only know about ten percent. Not knowing much is the ideal distance to keep from her. You shouldn't want to know everything."

"…"

"It's not that. The fact that at least two, maybe three forces, including White Horse, are moving around… It was already troublesome enough when the False Accusations King sniffed her out, but now that her former students are contacting her under the guise of clients, even New York isn't safe anymore."

As an officer of the NYPD, who worked day and night to maintain public safety, she'd have liked to hear New York being described as basically safe. But it seemed they now needed to relocate Ms. Kyoko, their protection target, to another area because of that situation.

Right.

Even if Ms. Kyoko forgot everything with the sound of Niagara Falls as her pillow, it didn't mean her opponents would forget… It was a ridiculous notion, but for Kyoko Okitegami, New York was no longer a safe zone.

"So, somewhere in another state?"

"Hahaha, how about your home state of California? My wife has always wanted to live in Kansas. She's a fan of 'The Wizard of Oz'… But in any case, it would be better to get her off the North and South American continents so that neither her former students nor the False Accusations King can easily follow. It'll be outside the FBI's jurisdiction, but there's nothing we can do about it. For now, I'm thinking India might be a good place."

India?

The Forgetful Detective Agency's Delhi branch?

Switching from coffee to chai?

No, the procedure to relocate her abroad might be true, but there was no way this little man would reveal the destination in such a call that could be intercepted anywhere… Maybe he was being clever and it really was India, but wherever it was, the fact remained that Officer Casteiz would never see that Forgetful Detective again.

What was this feeling?

It wasn't sadness or loneliness, but a sudden sense of loss.

Was that the kind of loss Ms. Kyoko experienced every morning? Thinking of it that way, for the first time, the officer felt like she understood just a little bit about that mysterious illegal immigrant. Maybe about one percent.

Crossing national borders.

"…She's like a ninja. Disappearing without even saying goodbye."

"It’s not like your memory of her will disappear. Cherish the memories of your adventure with that eccentric Japanese detective."

As if she could forget.

The sense of loss she gained after all those extraordinary experiences was etched in her heart and couldn’t be forgotten.

12

"Nice to meet you. I’m Kyoko Okitegami, a detective."

In preparation for testifying at the trial of the ‘SHURIKEN’ case that occurred in Central Park, Officer Casteiz, who had visited the park for a review to ensure there were no mistakes in her testimony, approached an extremely suspicious, bespectacled, white-haired Japanese woman who was sitting on a bench reading a book–and that was the response she got.

"…Why are you here?"

She was supposed to be in India.

Even if not India, she should have been deported from North and South America after Japan. Why was this detective still here, on Manhattan Island?

"That’s a strange thing to say. Isn’t Central Park a place of relaxation open to all New York City residents?"

"No, you’re an illegal immigrant, aren’t you?"

If Officer Rivaldi, who was currently in charge of another case, had been here, he would have physically reprimanded her for her rude behavior as a police officer who should be loved by the local residents. But the Japanese woman–Ms. Kyoko–didn’t seem bothered at all, instead

smiling slightly and proudly rolling up her left sleeve, as she said, "How well-informed. You're no ordinary person, are you?"

Written there in handwritten letters was:

"I am Kyoko Okitegami. 25 years old.

Detective.

Currently staying illegally in New York.

Until I repay my debt to the NYPD!"

"…"

It was an ID she had seen many times now, but the last sentence was new… "Until I repay my debt to the NYPD!"? With an exclamation mark, it seemed to convey a strong determination… "UNTIL REVENGE NYPD"? Scary. Was this an ID card or a declaration of criminal intent?

"Oh."

Could it possibly be referring to that incident?

The incident in the Niagara Parks Police interrogation room where Ms. Kyoko, in a sleep-deprived state, was bested by Officer Rivaldi concerning the bandage on her left leg… Such a disgrace, unbecoming of a famous detective, to be outdone by a local officer.

The policewoman thought she had forgotten about it after sleeping in the detention center.

She probably had forgotten, just as she had forgotten about Officer Casteiz now… The FBI agent proudly explained that one of the benefits of being the Forgetful Detective was that no matter how terrible a mistake she made, no matter how humiliating it was, she could forget about it right away.

However, just as forgetfulness was her nature, judging by her sulky attitude that day, her competitive spirit was also a part of Kyoko Okitegami's nature–even if she could laugh off her own mistake of misjudging the victim's dominant hand, the fact that she was utterly defeated must have bothered her, even if she had managed to save face. She probably couldn’t sleep at night knowing that she had been left in the dust by the NYPD.

That's why she added it in the detention center.

That resolute line on her ID–it was like a ‘FUBO’ technique with a magic marker.

The FBI agent’s authority was so great that he could even build a prison on the Thousand Islands. To protect one detective, establishing a new office overseas would have been a day’s work… But without the person’s consent, even such immense authority was nothing more than a flimsy piece of paper.

In Japanese, they'd call such a pie in the sky, "like a picture of a rice cake."

A famous detective who could easily slip through US immigration without even a forged passport, and who had now decided not to leave Manhattan until she got her revenge, had started asserting her right to reside in that old, decrepit apartment. How on earth could anyone manage to evict her?

Just thinking about that little blonde man with golden eyes, now probably pulling his hair out, made the officer want to clutch my stomach in laughter. It made her want to, but...

"According to the badge you showed me earlier, Assistant Officer Casteiz, you’re with the NYPD, right? The organization I admire so much. This police questioning must be some sort of fate, so wouldn't you consider giving me a job?"

"Uh, well…"

If she were truly, genuinely concerned about Ms. Kyoko’s safety, she could discreetly talk to Officer Rivaldi, stage a fake case, and intentionally lose a deduction battle so that the last line on the ID on her left arm would be quickly erased. That would probably be the humane course of action. But that straight-laced man, even to drive the Forgetful Detective out of the country, would never stoop to something as underhanded as rigging the outcome.

Besides, Officer Casteiz could at least comprehend how exceptional this situation was. In the history of the Forgetful Detective, a history that didn't accumulate, this might be the first time something like this had happened.

She, who wasn’t bound by her own past and wasn’t imprisoned by any memory, had still decided that she wouldn’t forget the NYPD.

To be a detective. To continue being one.

Then the policewoman too… shall continue her work.

There in New York, she'd continue this adventure with the master detective.

"…This is perfect timing. There’s a strange series of murders happening all over Manhattan Island right now, and I’d really like some expert advice. My superior is in charge, so I’ll introduce you. You might already know from the newspapers, but there’s some unpublished information

that hasn’t been reported. For some reason, unusual cards are being found at each crime scene. It seems these relics are of Japanese origin, something called ‘KARUTA.’"

"Let’s go together, before the victims reach a hundred. Don’t worry, my memory is perfect. However, my fee is negotiable."

Without forgetting to add that, Ms. Kyoko stood up from the bench in Central Park and snapped shut the book she had been reading.

Kyoko Okitegami’s Fubo Technique — Forgotten

Afterword

There’s a world of difference—no, it’s completely different—between traveling through a foreign land and living in one. Whether you put it nicely and say you’re a guest, or harshly and say you’re an outsider, there’s no way that sightseeing in an unfamiliar town, where you have no connections, is the same as putting down roots and living with your feet firmly on the ground. These two experiences are more than just contrasting; they’re almost polar opposites. Of course, just because a town is unfamiliar doesn’t mean everyone will act the same—some say, "What happens on a trip, stays on a trip," while others say, "It is simply common courtesy to clean up after yourself." On the other hand, there are those who, because they’re moving to a new place, straighten their collars and offer their neighbors soba noodles as a greeting, while others, knowing they’ll never have to move again, settle in and let things get messy. So, you can’t make blanket statements. These are, after all, perspectives from the travelers or newcomers, and how the town itself feels about them is another matter entirely. Sometimes, a tourist who thinks they are warmly welcomed might find they aren’t accepted as a traveler, or a newcomer intending to be friendly might not be recognized as a resident. It’s not a simple matter. Sometimes, someone who considers themselves a traveler is treated as a resident before they realize it, or even if they see themselves as a resident, those around them might think of them as a traveler who will vanish like a ninja someday. Such misunderstandings can be quite sad.

And so, here we are with the Forgetful Detective, New York Edition. I’ve completely forgotten why I decided to set Ms. Kyoko’s adventures overseas, but I was pleasantly surprised by how well she fits in. It’s so natural that you’d think she’d been living in New York from the very beginning. In reality, I admire people who can travel to new places and make themselves at home wherever they go. But perhaps, for Ms. Kyoko, it doesn’t matter where on Earth she wakes up; everywhere feels like home to her. Even if there were a Forgetful Detective Space Station Edition someday, she would probably solve mysteries with the same enthusiasm. So, this is the fourteenth installment of the Forgetful Detective series? "The Ninja Scroll of Kyoko Okitegami."

The cover of this book, with its intriguing combination of ninja arts and New York, was wonderfully illustrated by Mr. VOFAN. Thank you very much. The stories "Shuriken," "Hyoro-Gan," and "Fubo Technique" were all published in the newly revamped "Mephisto" magazine. It was a fun serialization!

Nisio Isin